DECEMBER 20th ISSUE, 1925
VOL. LVI No. 2

ADVENTURE

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1925
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PUBLISHED
THREE TIMES A MONTH

Adventure

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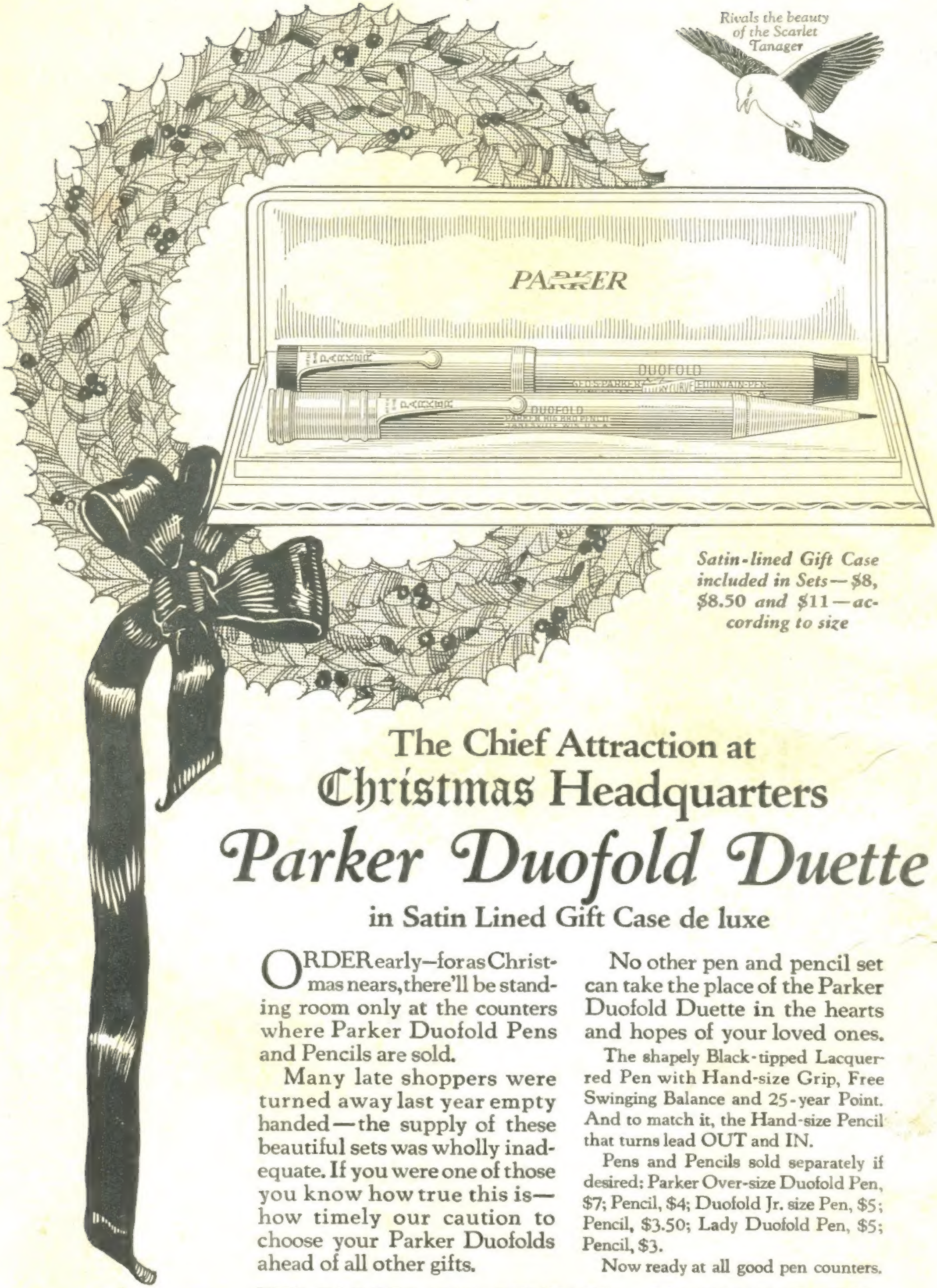

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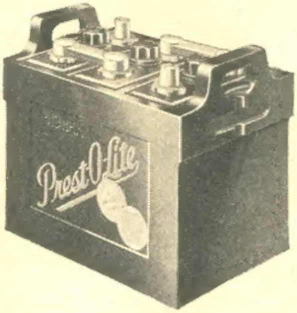

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Dec. 20th, 1925

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Volume 56
Number 2

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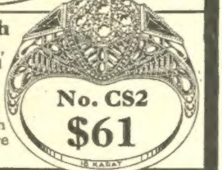

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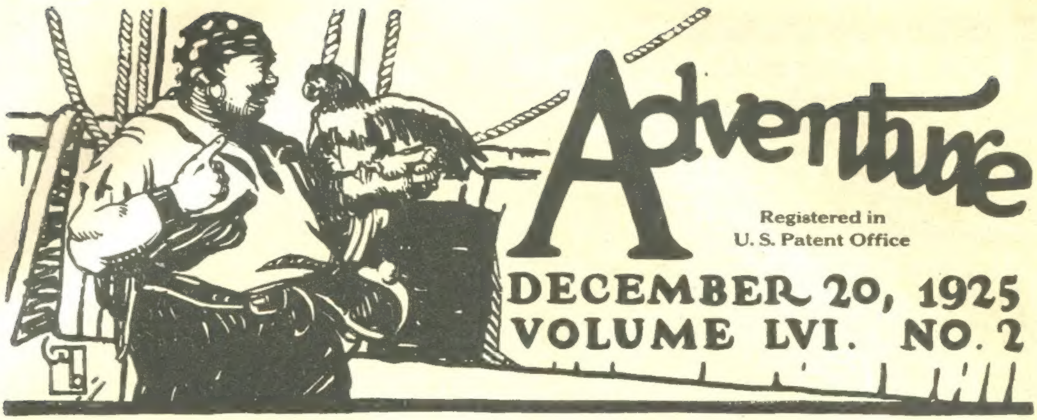

Adventure

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DECEMBER 20, 1925
VOLUME LVI. NO. 2

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The editor assumes no risk for manuscripts and illustrations submitted to this magazine, but he will use all due care while they are in his hands.

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**Occasionally one of our stories will be called an "Off-the-Trail" story, a warning that it is in some way different from the usual magazine stories, perhaps a little different, perhaps a good deal. It may violate a canon of literature or a custom of magazines, or merely be different from the type usually found in this magazine. The difference may lie in unusual theme, material, ending, or manner of telling. No question of relative merit is involved.*

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Headings . . . . **Walter M. Baumhofer**

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Statement of the ownership, management, circulation, etc., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, of *Adventure*, published tri-monthly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1925. State of New York, County of New York, *ss.* Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared J. F. Birmingham, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of *Adventure* and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, The Ridgway Company, a corporation, Spring and Macdougal Streets, New York City. Editor, Arthur Sullivant Hoffman, 223 Spring Street, New York City. Managing Editor, none. Business Manager, James F. Birmingham, 223 Spring Street, New York City. 2. That the owner is The Ridgway Company, a corporation, Spring and Macdougal Streets, New York City, whose stockholders are: The Federal Publishing Company, a corporation, 15 Exchange Place, Jersey City, N. J., whose stockholder is: The Butterick Company, a corporation, Spring and Macdougal Streets, New York City, whose stockholders are: Block, Maloney & Co., 74 Broadway, New York City; Chisholm & Chapman, 52 Broadway, New York City; S. R. Latshaw, 237 West 74th Street, New York City; Laidlaw & Co., 26 Broadway, New York City; Noyes & Jackson, 42 Broadway, New York City; Laura J. O'Loughlin, 514 West 114th Street, New York City; Orvis Bros. & Co., 60 Broadway, New York City; Mrs. Arethusa Pond, 600 West 115th Street, New York City; Charles D. Rafferty as sole surviving successor Trustee of the Estate of Wm. H. Gelshenen, Deceased, care of Garfield National Bank, 190 Fifth Avenue, New York City; Whitehouse & Co., 111 Broadway, New York City; G. W. Wilder, 41 Fifth Avenue, New York City; B. F. Wilder, Bell and Maxwell Avenues, Bayside, Long Island, New York; W. J. Wollman & Co., 120 Broadway, New York City. 3. *That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding* 1 *per cent. or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are:* None. 4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him. J. F. Birmingham, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 28th day of September, 1925. Blevins C. Dunklin, Notary Public, New York County. County Clerk's No. 170 Register No. 7118. Bronx County Clerk's No. 9 Register No. 2710. Kings County Clerk's No. 18 Register No. 7076. (*My commission expires March* 30, 1927.) (Seal.) Form 3526—Ed. 1924.

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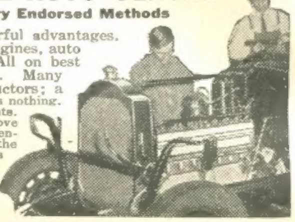

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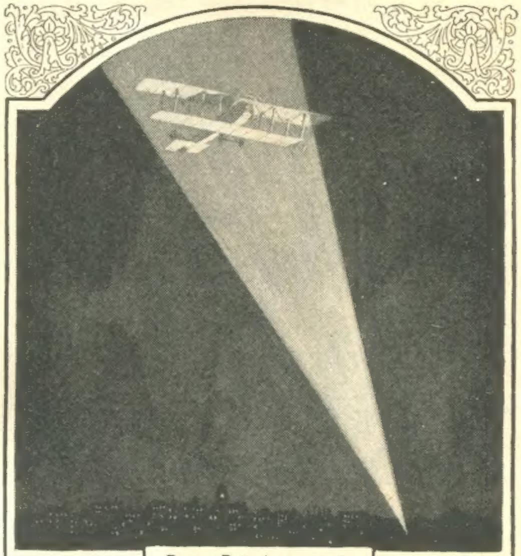

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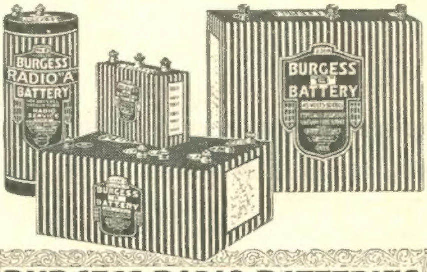

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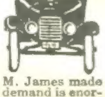

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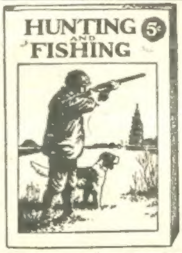

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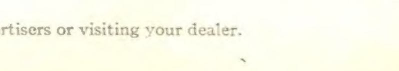

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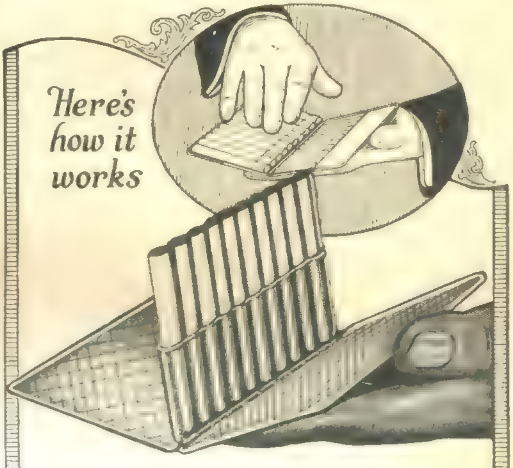

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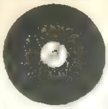

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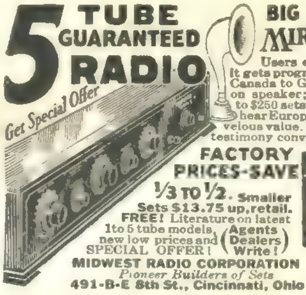

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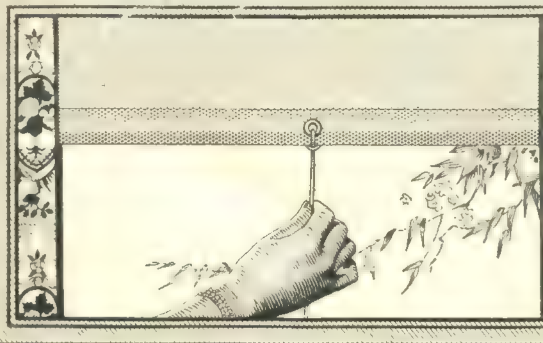

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Adventure
DECEMBER 20, 1925
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The EXPENSIVE PRISONER

A Complete Novelette

by Leonard H. Nason

Author of "Rockets at Daybreak," "Eye-Wash," etc.

A LONG stretch of rolling meadow shimmered in the midday sun. The trees on the far side of the field were motionless in the heat, but their images quivered and trembled to the eye of the beholder, for the heat from the field before the trees rose between in great waves.

A whistle trilled faintly, like a marsh bird piping and, as its echoes died, six men arose suddenly from the grass. Their appearance was astonishing. They wore the uniform of the American Army, model of 1917. They had trench caps pulled down around their ears, and their arms held stiffly at their sides. An instant they stood, then as suddenly were gone, falling on their faces as one man. Six more appeared in the same manner farther down the field, rising stiffly from the grass and falling woodenly down again. A third group came into sight and disappeared like the paddle of a revolving mill wheel. The first group stood up again and once more fell flat.

For several minutes this continued, the soldiers appearing for an instant and then lying down again. An observer would have noticed that these soldiers made no progress, but rose in the same place each time and lay down again where they appeared. Suddenly there was more whistling, prolonged and agitated, a whole flock of birds this time, and then, with a straggling yell, a line of Americans sprang from the ground and began a lumbering charge across the field toward the line of woods on the far side.

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After their first croaking yell they were silent, pounding along over the hot grass, raising a little cloud of dust at each step, their bayonets glittering in the sun. They neared the woods where a crooked line of new earth marked a trench system, their bayonets swung down. Several movements of the bayonet manual were executed, and the men disappeared in the trench.

Back in the field, quite near the spot where the charge had begun, some men lay on their stomachs smoking. To them came another man, mopping his brow.

"Come on, you goldbricks," said this one, "bend your backs on them dummies! You guys don't know what a soft job you got."

"The dummies ain't supposed to be goin' now," objected one of the recumbent men. "The raiders has gone forward."

"You haul on that rope," said the first speaker, who wore the stripes of a sergeant. "The dummies is to appear at intervals throughout the attack. How the —— else is the boche to be mystified? What the —— do you know about tactics anyway? Come on, now, exercise your kidneys a little. Bend your backs! An' no argument! If you birds don't like your job, I'll speak to the old man and have you go forward with the assault."

The men groaned and taking hold of ropes that lay in the grass, began to pull upon them. At the first tug, the stiff figures of six men rose from the ground some distance in front, and at the second tug they fell once more on their faces. Another rope brought six more up, and still another brought them down. The men at the ropes swore heartily and removed their superfluous clothing. The sun showed them no mercy.

The assaulting wave had entered the trench system and proceeded to mop up the trench. On the edge of the trench a group of officers observed their progress. In the center of this group was a tall spare man, a man with thin face and deep-set eyes, a type of man that is seen only in the priesthood and in the Army. This man had a triple row of campaign ribbons on his blouse, and wore the insignia of a colonel. He expressed dissatisfaction with the affair.

"This will never do," said the thin man. "You'd think these men were walking in a garden somewhere. They don't realize that they're supposed to be mopping up a trench that is filled with enemy troops. And this show will only be a partial success, no matter how many prisoners we take, if we lose a lot of men. The division commander will be highly displeased if our losses are excessive."

In the trench the mopping up continued. The men dragged their way along the trench, shambling and shuffling, muttering curses and giving the general impression of a chain gang being led to the rock pile. After a space of perhaps five minutes, there was more whistling, and the men turned and climbed out of the trench again. Then they departed at a trot for the place where the assault had originated. Here they cast themselves on the ground and panted.

"If this is war," groaned a man, wiping the perspiration from his face with his sleeve, "then give me peace at any price. Man, I'm a dove from now on!"

"Cheer up," said another. "This is the last time we do this, an' we eat now. After we eat it won't be so bad. Ain't it hotter than the cellars o' ——?"

"Ain't it!" agreed another. "I see the chow gun smokin' away like a fire engine. I hope we get set up to a good meal. I don't mind how much work if we get good chow afterwards."

"There goes all the officers out to talk to 'Skinny' Magruder," exclaimed one of the men. "Now what's that mean?"

"I can give a guess," said another. "It means we don't get no dinner."

IT WAS true that the officers were gathering about a chair in which sat the lean man. This last puffed his cigar and contemplated the toe of his boot until all the officers had arrived and were standing about in an anxious circle, perspiring slightly. There was a major of infantry with four lieutenants, an engineer officer, a medical officer and a chorus of artillery officers of all ranks from major down. The lean man regarded them all and then spoke impressively.

"Gentlemen," he began, "I am sure that the division commander would be deeply disappointed if he could see the things that I have seen this morning. You know this won't do at all. It won't do at all. We must realize that this operation that we are to take part in is a highly technical matter, a most important affair. A raid of a section of hostile trenches by such a small number as are taking part in this one is a very difficult matter. The least slip, the slightest mistake will result in the destruction of the entire party. Unfortunately none of you seem to realize the seriousness of the situation. Remember that we are contending with an alert and active enemy, highly trained and efficient in the use of all arms. You artillery men must remember that you have a very important part in this affair. I noticed you, during the rehearsal of the attack, chatting pleasantly under the trees back there. You weren't brought out here to chat, but to take part in the rehearsal. Major Catherly, at the twenty-fifth minute, what kind of fire will your second piece, B battery, Fortieth Field Artillery, be firing?"

The officer addressed began vaguely to consult a long sheet of paper he had in his hand marked "Table of Distribution of Artillery Fire."

"Don't look on your time table!" barked the colonel. "Tomorrow night may be rainy and blacker than fifty —— with the wind blowing sixty miles an hour! You won't have any time to consult tables! Captain Glasheen, that's your battery, isn't it? What kind of fire will that gun be firing?"

The captain's eyelids flickered, and he visibly fluttered the pages of his mind's book.

"It will be firing deliberate fire, sir," said he, "on section 24 of the enemy trench system."

"And what will it fire the next minute?"

"It will fire barrage fire, sir."

"Good enough," said the colonel, puffing his cigar. "Mr. Sloan, is your trench mortar section firing now, at the twenty-fifth minute?"

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Sloan, his ears reddening.

"How do you know?"

"Well, er—ahem!" Mr. Sloan's ears became purple.

"Quite so," said the colonel. "I don't know myself. Read what it says on your time table."

The poor second lieutenant—officers of this rank are addressed as Mister by their superiors, as though they weren't really officers after all—opened his time table and read aloud—

"The trench mortars will open fire blank minutes after the artillery have ceased firing."

"You see?" said the colonel, looking around with a slight smile. His face hardened suddenly and he leaped to his feet, flinging the camp-chair from him. "Here we are on the eve of an attack and not one of you knows the least thing about it! Why these slipshod militia methods would wreck a raid on a city dump. By ——, I'll straighten you out! Now then, I want every artillery officer to know precisely what each gun under his command is doing at each minute of this attack, what kind of shell it is using, at what minute it shifts fire or changes type of ammunition. I'll give you until eight tonight to commit these distribution tables to memory. You can begin now! The infantry and engineer officers remain. The rest dismissed!"

When the artillery had gone away with rage and hatred in their hearts, the colonel turned to the infantry.

"Each of you officers take charge of your patrol. We'll go through this thing again right from the beginning and I'll accompany each patrol to show you how it should be done!"

The infantry major looked around at the solemn faces of his lieutenants and murmured something about dinner.

"Dinner?" cried the colonel. "Dinner? Do you know that we're at war? Do you think this is still a summer camp? Dinner! By George, that will go on your record, Major! Dinner! There'll be a lot of men will never think of dinner again if this thing falls through tomorrow night, and those that do think of dinner again will have —— little appetite! Posts!"

The officers went sadly away.

In a minute or two the colonel took out his watch and looking at it intently, at the proper second blew a wailing blast on his whistle.

"Zero!" he roared. "What's going on now?" he called to the group of artillerymen.

"The French are firing gas!" they replied in chorus like school boys.

The colonel was seen to clasp his head with his hands and then shake both fists at the patient sky. Finally he made a gesture of deepest disgust and walked over toward the place where the heads of the indignant infantry showed above the grass.

"The artillery," began the colonel, "fires for twenty minutes. When I blow the whistle that signifies the twenty minutes is up. Then you men do what you're supposed to do. But we'll do it differently this time. I'll give the signal for each patrol to go forward. Now then!" He blew his whistle.

"Engineers!" he called.

Up leaped some men, their faces streaked with sweat and dirt and, picking up two logs, they started across the field with them.

"Lieutenant Colville!" A lieutenant and ten men, some armed with rifles and some with pistols and wire cutters, stood up and moved after the engineers.

"Lieutenant Glynn!"

A second patrol moved out.

"First patrol, go straight to your objective, but don't get in the trench. Now then, Lieutenant Trotter!"

A third group of ten men, armed as were the first two, started across the field.

"Of course on the night of the attack," observed the colonel, "the second and third patrols will not move until given the order to do so by Major Vincent. The supports will hold themselves in readiness. Now then, stretcher bearers out. The stretcher bearers will not enter the trench, you know, even tomorrow night, but will act as connecting files between Lieutenant Colville's patrol and Major Vincent."

THE engineers with their logs had reached the distant trench; they put their logs down, and retired. These logs represented portable mines and were supposed to be blowing up the enemy's wire at that precise second.

The wire destroyed, the first patrol went forward and, reaching the edge of the trench, came to an anticlimatic halt. The other patrols came up and did the same, looking anxiously over their shoulders at the distant figure of the colonel. When the last patrol had arrived at the trench, and the stretcher bearers had been strung across the field from the trench to the mythical post of command, the colonel approached the patrols, moving slowly and puffing at his cigar.

"Lieutenant Colville, what is the mission of your patrol?"

"We are to break into the trench and defend the sap there—" pointing—"against the entrance of the enemy from the communication trench. Dugouts in the trench are to be bombed."

"And what is the mission of your patrol?" asked the colonel, turning to Lieutenant Glynn.

There was a sigh from the men and an uneasy movement that made their equipment clatter. They were hot and hungry, and detested all this discussion at the meal hour. The lieutenant, however, replied that he was to follow the first patrol into the trench and work east along it, and the leader of the third patrol stated that he was to enter the trench and lend a hand where he was needed.

"That's very good," said the colonel, "but have you men thought that it will be dark and that the trench may be full of gas and very probably will be full of smoke?"

"Oh, that's all right," said Lieutenant Colville, "we know our way around in this trench as though it were our own kitchen."

"Hmmm!" said the colonel darkly. "That we'll see. Now then, every one put a handkerchief or a blindfold of some kind over his eyes. Hurry now, we want to get this over with."

The men, under the colonel's eye, gave no sign of their feelings, but each assisted to blindfold his neighbor with anything that came to hand, handkerchiefs of doubtful color, bandanas, and even puttees, which their owners, having nothing better, were forced to remove and use for that purpose. Then, looking like a bunch of men about to appear before a firing squad, the soldiers awaited the colonel's pleasure.

"Now then," said the colonel, "the first patrol in. The others will follow by the watch, just as they will tomorrow night. Go!"

The men of the first patrol stumbled forward, stretching out their feet and feeling for the edge of the trench. Some found it and got cautiously down, swinging their legs in first and then lowering themselves carefully. In the trench they began to grope about for something to give them their bearings, some seized their comrades by the face, there were muttered requests to "Leggo my nose fer ——'s sake!" or "Where the —— you shovin' to? This ain't no football game!"

There was a dummy dugout at a short distance; that is, a dugout entrance cut in the parapet of the trench, to indicate its location, and into this shallow space the leader of the patrol groped his way. Then he began to paw over the ground to see where he was, and why the trench had come to such an abrupt end. The colonel watched from the parapet with a superior smile. Then he gave the leader of the second patrol a shove, indicating that he should enter the trench. The second patrol did so, in the same manner as the first had performed, with this exception, that now there were men in the trench and the second patrol landed upon them with hobnailed feet. The men of the first patrol protested indignantly, but in whispers.

"Move along the trench," directed the officers. "Quick, now, follow along the trench wall!"

The men began to spread out slightly, but stepping on each other's heels and hindering each other's progress. At this moment, the colonel ordered the third patrol into the trench, and confusion was supreme. A voice rose from the trench, loud and clear.

"Now lay off shovin'! You'd think you was goin' home to supper on the subway! Now! How do you like that?"

There was a howl of agony as the speaker either stamped on some one's instep or else kicked his neighbor's shin. The colonel still smiled.

"All right," he called suddenly, "off the blindfolds! All out! There, you see for yourselves how this thing stands!" The men climbed out of the trench and stood in an embarrassed manner on the parapet. Their eyes wandered from time to time to a chow gun across the road, where a cook and several K. P.'s were seen to be putting marmite cans back into the fire and hoisting pans of hash from the table back on to the stove. The cook was going to try to keep their dinner warm for them at least.

The colonel delivered a lecture on the proper methods of finding one's way about in an enemy trench in darkness. Then, blindfolding himself with a very fine clean white handkerchief, he leaped into the trench and demonstrated. He kept his left hand against the trench wall, felt his way rapidly along, stopping at the dummy dugouts and hurling imaginary bombs into their depths, and finally finished the tour of the trench and returned to the three patrols.

"There," said he, "that's the way it should be done. Now then, we'll go through the thing again. I'll show you how it can be done with a number of men. Blindfolds!"

THE men, with a last despairing look at the kitchen where the cook and his helpers were seen seated on the pole of the limber, smoking cigarets, put on their blindfolds, and the rehearsal went on. The first patrol leaped into the trench and took up its post in readiness to prevent the arrival of reinforcements; the second patrol, headed by the colonel, entered the trench and proceeded along it, and the third, at the proper moment, leaped down. Unfortunately the third patrol had moved eastward along the parapet as they were waiting, and so when they jumped down, they jumped right into the second patrol. There was a minute of intense confusion and grunting.

Lieutenant Glynn, who commanded the second patrol and who was very near the colonel in this moment of struggle and turmoil, heard a faint yet distinct sound, a sound that was not foreign to these rehearsals, the sound of a hobnailed boot in collision with flesh. The lieutenant heard some one grunt; there was the sound of a blindfold being torn off, and sputtering like fat in a frying pan. Then the struggling words found exit, and profanity began to rise upon the startled air. The lieutenant discreetly kept his blindfold on, for it was the colonel's voice that was lifted in wrath.

"Who did that?" shouted the colonel. "Answer! Take off that —— blindfold, Glynn, and show some signs of interest in what's going on here. By ——, I'll have every man court martialed!"

The lieutenant removed his blindfold. He discovered the colonel, his face very red and his eyes spouting fire, looking earnestly from one to the other of the men that were crowded in the narrow trench. The men, all blindfolded, stood about with the patient air of the blind, and turned their sightless eyes toward the sound of voices.

"What happened, sir?" asked the lieutenant.

"Never mind what happened!" said the colonel. "Take off those blindfolds!"

The men removed whatever they had over their eyes and the colonel passed down the trench, looking intently into each face. From the far end of the trench the other officers watched in amazement. The faces of the soldiers were all the same. They were all dirty, they were all streaked with sweat, and their eyes held no sign of guilt.

"Well, enough for now," said the colonel. "But this won't be the end of this thing. I'll have some one's neck for this, believe me, and the men that don't come back tomorrow night can count themselves lucky. Dismiss the men! After dinner we'll see what we shall see!"

The patrols were assembled once more on the edge of the trench and then marched across the field in the direction of the rolling kitchen where there was a camp of shelter tents. After they had crossed the road, Lieutenant Glynn halted his patrol and addressed them briefly.

"I'm not going to inquire as to who kicked the colonel," began the lieutenant, "but I know it was some one in this patrol, and I can give a good guess as to who it was. However, that's not the point. The point is that you men have got to realize that this is a war and not a picnic and that you'll have to go hungry and without sleep and do all sorts of unpleasant things and you can't help matters by pulling any such stunt as was pulled a few minutes ago. I'm glad I didn't see it, because I wouldn't want to be the man that would have to turn a fellow townsman in to the authorities for any such offense as kicking an officer. But if I'd seen it, I certainly would have told the colonel who did it. Now this afternoon I want some interest shown in the rehearsal and if there's any more pleasantry pulled, the man that's responsible will have the sorriest time he's had since he's been in the army. Dismissed."

The patrol went immediately to their tents and from their tents to the mess line, moving at full speed. They had for dinner, bacon and eggs, fried potatoes, syrup, white bread, and coffee with condensed milk therein. Each patrol, being from a different company, ate by itself, and hence Lieutenant Glynn's patrol sat themselves down in the neighborhood of a newly felled tree and began to expend their dinner.

"Fellars," began one man, licking his syrup from his fingers where it had run on to his hand from his mess-kit lid, "it's worth waitin' for to get a meal like this. This here is kind of a vacation after all. No K. P. to do, no fatigue, no nothin', an' eat like a hotel."

"We're gettin' fattened for the slaughter," said another man, "an' furthermore, I'd rather be eatin' slum than runnin' around that hot field. I tell yuh, Palmer, it tuckers me! I hain't worked so hard since I was a quarryman. Who the —— give the colonel the root?"

The patrol chuckled deeply.

"We was all blindfolded," said a third man, "an' blindfolded men ain't no kind of witnesses even for a court martial. That bein' stated an' admitted, I'll say the colonel had it coming to him. A soldier ain't to be kept from his dinner with impunity."

" 'Deed he ain't," said the first speaker, "especially if he comes from Vermont."

"Well, Vermont's a good place," said Palmer, "an' the only thing that gives a Vermont outfit a bad name is when it gets consolidated with the Governor's Gallopin' Horse Guards from Rhode Island."

"Gwan!" spoke several members of the group. "We give your old milishy outfit a little snap."

The other members grunted in scorn, but made no further comment. The day was too hot and they too worn with their exertions of the morning to discuss the ancient question of which of the two regiments that had been consolidated to form the one to which they belonged was the better. Lieutenant Glynn's patrol comprised four men from the Rhode Island regiment and six from the Vermont, of whom three were well known in the regiment. The broad-shouldered, husky looking man with the blue eyes and the red face was Push Dugan, a man but newly arrived from Ireland. It was rumored that he had taken some part in the revolution of 1916, that had forced him to flee to America.

BESIDE him was a boy of eighteen or so, slightly undersized, but with snapping black eyes and a keen face. This was Palmer, known variously as "Sprout," "Louse," "Two Bits" and other diminutives. It was said in the company that one morning Palmer did not appear in the orderly room with the usual file of delinquents, and that the company commander thereupon inquired if Palmer was ill.

Palmer's boon companion, buddy, and bunk-mate was "Dopey" McKnight, who, as his name implies, was rather heavy on his feet. Extra duty and cook's police were forever falling to his lot. The N. C. O. in charge of quarters had standing orders to wake him ten minutes before reveille, and then he either arrived late or half dressed, his shoe-laces undone and the strings of his breeches trailing in the dirt. He had a long patient face like a horse, and his hair cut short in that convict style affected by some men at the front, so that the bumpy contours of his head were visible.

"The burning question of the hour," said Palmer, lighting a cigaret, "is who kicked the colonel."

"Dopey McKnight," said a fat man, pulling tight the string of a Bull Durham bag.

"I never did neither," cried Dopey, who had just arrived with brimming mess-kit.

"That's a —— of a way for a guest to act," observed the fat man, "to go round kickin' his hosts. You ain't got no claim to kick, you ain't been in this part as long as we have."

"I never kicked no colonel," said Dopey McKnight, "an' you guys c'n all go to grass. As fer me kickin' my hosts, I just went in on this thing to make a even ten, an' all I got out of it was to get mixed up in a lot of trouble. You fellars needn't think you'll get away with kickin' the colonel. He'll put us all in the barbed wire hotel an' won't let us out 'til the guilty guy confesses, an' the guilty guy won't confess an' so we'll give the guilty guy a good trouncin' an' then he'll say he done it an' we'll get out."

"Is that so!" said Palmer, ruffling his hackles.

"I thought so," said Dopey, and applied himself to his dinner.

There was a light ripple of smiles, as a breeze stirs the face of a quiet pond, and the men proceeded to scrape their mess-kits with bread, to smoke and to loosen their belts and enjoy a moment's peace. The discussion as to the identity of the colonel's assailant was not continued.

These men belonged to a regiment of one of the National Guard divisions that had arrived in France at an early period of the American participation. Now in National Guard regiments, the men of each company all come from the same town, and have known each other since childhood. Lieutenant Glynn taught history in the High School, the company commander was a real estate agent, Palmer was a grocery clerk and Dopey McKnight was bell-hop at the Junction House. The regiment had been consolidated with another to form a war strength organization, but the old company organizations were for the most part still intact.

The regiment had completed its training and been sent to a quiet sector of the front for experience in trench warfare. The division commander had authorized the colonel of this particular regiment to undertake an operation on his own behalf against the enemy and had sent Colonel Magruder to superintend it. The colonel was a close student of methods of warfare from the time of Alexander on, and this was his first opportunity to put his theories into practice. He was the man who had planned the raid, he was the man who had made out the tables of fire for the artillery, and he was the man who was in charge of the rehearsal. The operation was to be a raid to secure prisoners and booty.

The first battalion had been selected to furnish the personnel, ten men from each company, with one officer. Volunteers had been asked for, the entire battalion had of course volunteered and so the names of the men had been put in a hat and drawn by the company commanders. It was rumored that this drawing had not been impartial, but those whose names had been drawn made no objection. The forty infantrymen with a medical detachment and a detail of engineers had then been loaded into trucks and taken away, nor did their comrades know what had become of them. As a matter of fact they had been transported to a distant part of the sector and far behind the lines, where they constructed a trench system, the exact duplicate of the one they were to raid. In this trench system the troops had rehearsed the raid and the officers of artillery who were to support the raid had been brought over for the last day to get an idea of what the infantry's part in the affair was to be like. The infantry had been rehearsing for two days, but when Colonel Magruder arrived to see the dress rehearsal, he had been displeased with what result has been seen.

After dinner the rehearsal began again. Once more the whistle trilled and the dummies rose and fell. Once more the patrols moved across No Man's Land. They did not go now as they had at first, all in a mass and yelling as if they were taking part in a charge, but slowly and on their knees, Lieutenant Colville with his ten, Lieutenant Glynn with his, the third patrol with theirs and lastly the stretcher bearers, at long intervals, forming connecting files between the commander of the raid and the patrols. The detail from the fourth company, who were to be supports at the disposal of the commander, were to work the dummies.

There was no blindfolding this time, and the colonel kept an eagle eye on every man. The artillery officers were stretched in a line at the edge of the woods, and at irregular intervals the colonel called upon them to tell what kind of fire their particular battery was firing and on what target. The artillery cursed the day that they had ever seen France, but they studied their distribution tables carefully, nevertheless.

THE afternoon dragged wearily to its close, but the colonel showed no sign of dismissing the rehearsal. He ran about like a man of twenty-one instead of fifty, he showed one soldier how to execute a lunge with a bayonet, he showed another the proper method of using both bomb and revolver simultaneously as offensive weapons, he taught another, one of the stretcher bearers, some high class profanity when he found him surreptitiously smoking a butt instead of being on the lookout for signals from the file in front.

When the weary raiders were at their last gasp, there was a welcome interruption. A motorcycle buzzed down the road and stopped by the kitchen. The raiders, working their weary way across the field for the sixth or seventh time that afternoon, watched the rider from the corner of their eyes. He conferred with the cook, the cook pointed, and the dispatch rider parked his machine and came across the field on foot.

"Come on," bellowed the colonel, "never mind gawking around! Keep your eyes on that trench, that's where you're going. A little life now!"

The line of patrols continued its way, the first entered the trench; after a time the second followed, and Dopey McKnight seized the occasion to have a look to see where the colonel was.

"Hey!" he cried in a husky whisper to Palmer, "the old boy ain't watchin' us. He's got a letter from the dispatch rider."

Palmer poked his head out of the trench.

"That's so," said he wonderingly. "I hope it's a order callin' this circus off."

He shoved his helmet back on his head in order to see better.

"Cheese it!" cried a man at Palmer's elbow. " 'Stuffy' Glynn is watchin'!"

"Get a move on!" cried the lieutenant. "What the —— are you doing, Palmer? I'll put you in the kitchen for a week or so and see if I can't get a little work out of you."

The trench was effectually bombed, the dugouts mopped up, and the raiders climbed out again, to listen to the usual scathing criticism of their methods. The colonel, however, instead of waiting for them with kindling eye, was walking up and down in the field with clasped hands behind his back. A light cloud of dust showed where the dispatch rider had mounted his coughing steed and departed in the direction from which he had come.

"That'll do, men," called the colonel. "Assemble here for a moment." The men assembled and were told to stand at ease, which they did, leaning with mud-caked hands on their rifles and looking solemnly about. "I have just received an order," began the colonel, "from General Headquarters at Chaumont, and I'll speak about it in a minute. Meanwhile I want to tell you men the plans for tomorrow. Reveille will be at nine o'clock instead of at six, and at ten the trucks will be here to take us back to our own sector. We'll be home for dinner. In the afternoon you will clean your weapons and prepare for the final inspection at five o'clock. Uniform will be blouses, gas masks slung at the alert and pistol belts. The riflemen will not be expected to do any firing and will only carry such ammunition as they can put in their pockets.

"Also tomorrow afternoon each one will be issued two squares of white linen to sew on the back of the blouse and on the gas mask for identification purposes. Now about the order. I have been promoted to the grade of brigadier general and ordered home to command a unit of the new army. In order to give a stimulus to the operation of tomorrow night, I announce that the man that takes the first prisoner goes home with me as my orderly."

The colonel paused to give emphasis to his words. Then he continued.

"We won't do any more this afternoon, but after supper, when it gets dark, we'll go through it a few more times, to accustom the men to the terrain in darkness."

THE next morning, after a late breakfast, the men were loaded into trucks that had been waiting for them an hour or more.

"Pretty soft for you guys," remarked a truck driver, "an' us breakin' our necks to be over here early! An' when we get here you birds ain't yet eat your breakfast."

"'Sall right, kid," said Dopey, handing up packs to the men in the truck. "When you get home you can tell your mother you carried a truck load of soldiers once. Think o' that the next time you're spearin' tobacco."

The truck train had in it a number of troops from Connecticut, where tobacco is an important crop. Before the truck driver could think of a fitting reply, there was a howl from Palmer, who had been in the truck loudly giving directions to all and sundry.

"What's the matter, Sprout?" asked Dopey.

"My mess-kit!" cried Palmer. "Some one's swiped my mess-kit!"

"How do you know you didn't leave it somewheres?" asked one of the men.

"No, I didn't leave it anywhere," cried Palmer. "I put it in my haversack thing, I tell you. I put it there myself. And it had two bags o' Bull Durham in it. I don't give a —— for the mess-kit, but that's all the tobacco I got."

"I shouldn't wonder if some o' them hog wrastlers from H company didn't glue on to it," remarked Dopey. "They was hanging around the pile o' packs makin' sheep's eyes at 'em. They're kinda light on mess-kits and the like o' that since Jerry bombarded 'em the last time."

"That's so," cried Palmer. "Lemme outta here!"

"Where you goin'?" asked the others.

"I'm goin' to drink about a quart of H company blood!"

Palmer went back to the second truck into which H company's patrol, commanded by Lieut. Trotter, was loading its affairs. Here he came to a halt and regarded the men in the truck darkly.

"Hi, there," said one of the men perceiving him, "if there ain't Palmer! How's the price o' taller to your house?"

"Never mind the price o' taller," said Palmer. "Who's the onery sheep tick that stole my mess-kit?"

"No one in H company stole it," replied the first speaker. "We're kinda fussy about what we eat out of in this outfit."

"Is that so?" cried Palmer. "Well, I can lick any ten of you."

This belligerent statement was greeted with a ringing cheer by H company.

"Run away, Lightweight," cried a man, "before some one swats you with a newspaper an' irons you out like a pancake."

"Gwan, Palmer," advised another. "We ain't swiped your mess-kit. Gwan, run away back to your own outfit o' applesqueezers before some one shakes his fist at yuh an' knocks yuh outta the sector with the breeze from it."

"Beat it, Two by Four," said a third, "you should worry about a mess-kit. This time tomorrow you won't be interested in anything but a shovel."

Palmer was about to express his opinion of H company, their morals and upbringing, but the roaring of the other truck's motor advised him that it was about to depart.

"T' —— with the mess-kit," said he. "You guys can keep it. After you've had your breadhooks on it I wouldn't feed a pig out of it."

The second truck resounded with jeers as Palmer climbed aboard his own.

"Want the makin's?" some one called faintly as the trucks rattled away, and a white cotton bag could be seen waving in air. Palmer was speechless with rage. They had stolen his mess-kit after all and were now regaling themselves with the tobacco he had in it.

"Don't mind 'em none," comforted Dopey. "They're all thieves and crap shooters. That H company bunch shelters themselves from machine gun fire behind corkscrews, they're so crooked. I mind when we used to play 'em in basketball, that I left my false teeth to home and put my carfare in my shoe, an' then I didn't feel safe."

"All right," said Palmer, "when this little affair is over I'm gonna square my debts with those birds. That Solly Reed, I'll jump right on his neck and chew his ear off."

"They're a fine throng of thieves, so they are," said Push Dugan. "If the devil himself were on earth, and he to be a soldier, sure he would enlist in H company. It will be just their luck to be the ones that takes the prisoner and goes home with the colonel."

"That'll be pretty soft," said Dopey, his teeth rattling from the bumping of the truck. "All a man has to do is to grab off a nice big squarehead and get a ticket to the States. Simple enough!"

"Ain't it?" agreed Palmer. "Well, let George do it. I don't callate to give no quarter when I get into that German trench. Any boche as I meet is as good as dead."

"You tell 'em, Sprout," said Dopey. "And when one o' them big Huns gets you by the neck you give a screech and I'll come and rescue you."

The road becoming exceeding rough, conversation was impossible because when a man talked, his tongue perforce got between his teeth and, if the truck hit a bump at that moment, the effect was very unpleasant. The trucks brought the men back to their own regimental echelen, about four or five kilometers from the front, and there left them. After dinner, which Palmer to his disgust had to eat from a borrowed mess-kit that had no handle, the men were given the afternoon to clean their arms and prepare for the final inspection at four o'clock. Pistols and rifles must be spotless, shoes and helmets oiled, the proper amount of ammunition issued to each man, and gas mask and first aid pouches in order. Especially the last.

At five minutes before five the patrols were assembled by whoever happened to be senior non-commissioned officer present and then at five reported to their prospective patrol leaders. Shortly afterwards Major Vincent, who was to command the raid, appeared with the colonel. Major Vincent seemed to have a weight on his mind. So far he had had little to do with the preparations, the raid having been planned by the divisional staff, and since yesterday the divisional operations officer had taken complete charge of everything. The major at home was a judge of the district court. He knew a great many men in the battalion very well; some of them he had known since they were children.

It had occurred to him that in the course of the night's operations he might have to order some of these boys to their death, and he was wondering how he would face their mothers, their sisters or their wives when he should go home again. The officer of the Regular Army knows nothing of his men prior to their enlistment, but the National Guard officer has known his men all their lives, he knows their names and their histories as Julius Cæsar knew his legionaries. He knows their wives and how many children they have. If he is responsible for their father's death and goes home alive himself, he will have those children's state of orphanage before his eyes the rest of his life. The major thought upon these things and was not cheered thereby. He and the colonel proceeded to a final inspection of the assaulting party.

"IS THERE a bore in this rifle?" the colonel inquired of the first man, squinting down the barrel.

"Yes, sir," replied the soldier.

"You'd never know it," answered the colonel. "Who's ranking non-commissioned officer here?"

"I am, sir," said some one.

"Step out and follow me around," directed the colonel. "Have you a pencil and paper? Take this man's name, dirty rifle," directed the colonel. "Slack business, Major."

The major made no reply.

They moved on. The next half dozen men had nothing the matter with them; it was impossible to find anything wrong. The colonel was displeased. His mouth began to draw more and more into a straight line and the lines on his face seemed to grow deeper.

"You!" barked the colonel suddenly. "How much does your bayonet weigh?"

"Nine pounds, sir," replied the man.

The colonel's grim visage relaxed. "Take his name, sergeant," said he, and passed on to the next man.

"Here's a man with a hole in his blouse. Now, that's very slimey, Major." The colonel pointed out a tear on the shoulder of a blouse, probably caused by the front sight of the rifle. "That sort of thing there's no excuse for. The efficiency of an officer can usually be judged by the appearance of the men under his command."

The major was tired and nervous; he had many things upon his mind, and he resented the implied slur on his ability as a soldier.

"I can't see that such a thing is of importance now, sir," said he. "When that man comes back after having played around in the wire and the mud all night he'll have to have a new blouse anyway."

The colonel turned and again his mouth

tightened and his eyebrows lowered. He drew out of his pocket a little book of his own and made a note therein.

"That remark shows a lack of zeal, Major," said he in a harsh, yet subdued tone. "I'll see that it is incorporated in your record."

The inspection proceeded, but more hurriedly now. The colonel had dulled the edge of his appetite on the first ten or twelve men, and the rest got off lightly.

"Assemble the men," said the colonel at last. "Get them in a circle and explain the affair to them. Go over it carefully, so that every man will know what to do. I wish we could have the artillerymen here, but I suppose that's asking too much. Well, go through it thoroughly."

"Now, men," began the major when the men had been assembled in a circle about him and the colonel, "I want your closest attention because this affair tonight is a mighty serious one. I want you to realize that not only has every one of you got his own life in his hands, but the lives of all his comrades. The purpose of this raid is to get prisoners and information. Our object is to get them without losing a man. That's the reason we've rehearsed the thing so carefully and have spent so much time on planning things, so that the artillery and the patrols will move together and work together and support each other.

"Now yesterday the artillery pulled off a fake shoot, a fake bombardment of a portion of trench, and while it was going on the guns that are to fire tonight registered on their real targets. The fake bombardment was to allow them to do this without the Germans' suspicions being aroused. The whole regiment will be behind you men when you start and while you're gone, machine guns will be firing on the rear trenches of the German system to keep them from organizing a counter attack, the Stokes mortar and one-pounder outfits will take care of the enemy machine guns, and the assault will be preceded by a heavy bombardment. When you break into the trench you will meet with no resistance, because the garrison will be stupified by our shelling.

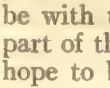
"Anyway, they won't know where to expect the attack because we're going to shell several sectors at once and then show the dummies, which will attract their attention away from the real place that we're going to break in on them. At the twentieth minute after zero, the engineers will fire their torpedo in front of the enemy wire and at the sound of the blast, the patrols will leave their dugouts and stand by. Three minutes later the first patrol will receive orders from me to leave. Each patrol will move only by my personal order. At the twenty-fifth minute the artillery will lift its barrage from the front line to the second line trench and the first patrol will enter the enemy front line. After that it's up to you. On signal from Lieutenant Colville, or upon hearing my trumpeter blow first call, the return will begin.

"The patrols will bring their prisoners and souvenirs into the dugout from which they started. In case of accident, such as a heavy bombardment of our front line or a strong counter attack, a red flare will be fired by the patrols and then I'll come out and try to get you back. If I don't arrive in a little time, the senior officer present will take charge and use his own judgment. Up till the fifteenth minute after zero I'll be in 'I' company's P. C. After that, in the front line trench in front of the Van Ness. The Hotel Vermont will be organized as a first aid station. The prisoners will be taken into the Van Ness. Any questions?"

There was quite a period of silence, and it appeared that there were no questions. The colonel looked with a speculative eye at the sun that was beginning to go down behind the trees.

"I guess you'd better be going, Major," said he. "Zero is at dusk, you know. I'll be with the artillery part of the time and part of the time at the brigade P. C., but I hope to be up to see the men come back. And don't forget," said the colonel raising his voice and speaking to the men, "that the man that takes the first prisoner goes home with me."

"Take charge of your patrols!" directed the major, and five minutes afterward they were on their way to the front.



"GOT your farewell letters all writ?" asked Dopey as he and Palmer marched along the road.

"Farewell letters? What d'yuh mean farewell letters? Who's sayin' farewell?"

"Why, we're all sayin' farewell," said Dopey. "Ain't we goin' into the Valley of Death, Noble Six Hundred?"

"Yeh," objected Palmer, "but we been

runnin' around in the heat for a week plannin' this thing so that no one would get killed. The artillery's goin' to flatten out the boche trench and when we get there, even the cooties in the bunks'll all be dead."

"It's little love I have for the British," spoke up Push, "but there's a few good points about them. Sure they do give their lads a bit droppie of potheen before they take them out to fight. It keeps a man from catching his death in the wet mud."

"You won't catch your death in mud tonight," said Palmer. "The sun today would dry up the Winooski river."

"Don't you think it," cried two or three together. "There's mud in France that don't never dry up, and the hotter it is in the daytime, the colder at night. I hope we find some likker in them Jerry dugouts. I hear they won't fight unless they're drunk, so they ought to have a lot of it along."

"They don't drink liquor when they make a raid," said Palmer. "I read all about it in a book a guy wrote that deserted from the boche. They drink ether."

"Ether!" cried the men. "Gahh!"

Conversation ended while this thought was digested. Some one suddenly had a thought that there had been no mention of supper and, after considerable heated debate and much complaining, Lieutenant Glynn so far descended from his dignity as to tell the men to shut up, that supper would be served at Gernecourt.

"We left all our mess-kits, sir," said Dopey.

"Well, they'll give you mess-kits and you won't even have to wash them," replied the lieutenant.

So they proceeded to Gernecourt, ate their supper, and then went forward into the front line trench, where they gathered in the dugout that bore a sign over the entrance—

HOTEL VAN NESS

SssssSSSSSS—Bong!

"Come on," cried Palmer, who was still in the trench, "step up forward in the car! Lemme in outta this! We're gettin' shelled!"

"Shut up, Coot!" said the man ahead. "That shell landed in Jerry's trench."

"It's the beginning of the bombardment!" cried another.

"Well, let's get in," urged Palmer. "Let's get in anyway, because Fritz will start to throw some o' them cabbages back and I want to be underground when he does."

There was a long rolling rumble, such as an enormous ball might make rolling down an endless bowling alley. It rolled and thundered and made strikes and spares on innumerable pins, and yet continued its mythical way. The bombardment of the German trenches had begun. It was cold at night in these trenches after the sun went down. The men began to shiver.

By the stairs Major Vincent stood with his watch in his hand. A telephone line had been laid into the dugout especially for this occasion and the major held the receiver to his ear. He was checking his watch and the three officers stood near him checking theirs. There was a man at brigade headquarters at the other end of the telephone who called off the minutes and announced what was going on. The major repeated what the other man said. The men filled the dugout and overflowed up the stairs, where they sat like the spectators on the bleachers at a baseball game and surveyed all below them.

They looked at each other with solemn faces and eyes gleaming in the lantern light. It is one thing to march light-hearted and free above ground and in daylight to an attack, but it is another thing to sit in the semi-darkness of a damp dugout, listening to the distant rumble of the bombardment and knowing that each second brings the moment for the assault nearer. Would the artillery break up the German resistance or would it not? That was the main question.

"Fifteen," said Major Vincent, "batteries firing on Bois de Belchene and position eighteen B lift their fire to trenches in rear. Dummies up." A long pause. "Enemy has begun to fire on our positions before Bois de Belchene. Retaliation fire by enemy has begun on Beaumont and Gernecourt roads. Oh ——! There goes the wire!"

The major looked at the receiver in disgust and then replaced it on the instrument.

"It's just as well," he remarked. "The boche might have heard us talking, although no mention was to be made of a raid and nothing said except what our artillery was doing, which Jerry knows as well as we do. Stand by, all. Lieutenant Colville, be ready. Twenty! Up we go! Take your time, men, go slow, no use to crowd!"

Up they all went into the trench. It was quite light in the trench after the murk of the dugout, but dusk was falling fast. The men spread out along the trench, each behind his patrol leader. The crashing of the shells was deafening. There were sixteen batteries of all calibres firing, mostly field-guns, but with some six- and eight-inch Howitzers thrown in for good measure. French mortars were throwing their handfulls of destruction at the enemy wire, machine guns were spraying communication and front line trenches and one-pounders were yapping like little dogs driven to frenzy by the noise.

"Twenty-three!" called the major. "Up you go! Good luck, Lieutenant."

The first patrol clambered up on to the parapet and with a few admonitions to each other, disappeared, their black figures going rapidly out of sight down the slope. The men in the trench listened, but it was impossible to tell in the noise and turmoil if there had been an increase of fire on the appearance of the first patrol. Lieutenant Glynn's patrol moved to a position of readiness.

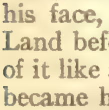
"Won't these here linen things we got sewed on to us make good targets out of us?" whispered Palmer to the man next to him.

"Twenty-five," announced the major.

The second patrol hitched their belts and the riflemen gripped their weapons.

"Twenty-five ten," said the major, "away you go! Good luck!"

The men rushed at the parapet. Dopey scrambled up, active enough for once in his life. Palmer made a leap, slipped, fell, felt some one seize his arm and put him on his feet again, some one boosted him from behind, and he was on the parapet, the wind in his face, and the blackness of No Man's Land before, a line of flame on the far side of it like a line of bonfires. This line of fire became higher and wider as he looked, for the artillery had shifted their fire at the twenty-fifth minute, and were now firing on the second line trenches. This shift of target had lightened the amount of shells falling for a minute as the guns were trained on the new target; then it began once more.



BANG! *Blung! Blong!* A series of sharp explosions in front marked where Lieutenant Colville's patrol had entered and begun to bomb the enemy trench. The second patrol quickened its pace.

"What was it the major said when he was climbin' out the trench?" yelled Palmer in Dopey's ear.

"I dunno," said Dopey. "I got other things on my mind. Can yuh smell any gas?"

"What's the matter?" asked "Push," turning at the sound of Palmer's yelling.

"I just wanted to know what the major said when we came out," said Palmer.

"Sure he said, 'God help the man that takes the first prisoner.' Mother o' me! Who thrun that?"

A shell exploded suddenly in front of them as if some one had clanged open and shut a great furnace door. A sheet of flame was visible for an instant, there was a hot breath in their faces, then they were all down, grovelling in the mud. There was no time to look around and see who had been hit. Another shell cast a sheaf of dirt over them, a third and fourth exploded so close together that they sounded like pistol shots. Palmer could hear a voice calling and, clearing one ear of dirt, he listened. Who had been hit? Then he discovered it was not a voice of pain, but one of anger.

"Into the trench, —— it! We'll all be killed if we lie here! Up on your feet if you've got any guts! Yellow ——, every one of you! Follow me!"

A fistful of shells blotted out the voice, but Palmer heard something crunching by his ear, and before he had made up his mind whether it was a piece of shell or not, he found himself on his feet and running. In an incredibly short time he found himself stumbling and tripping over wire. It had been badly chewed and uprooted, and offered little resistance to his progress.

From the corner of his eye Palmer saw Push Dugan going through the wire in great leaps, like a man going over the hurdles in a race. A steep parapet, a pile of sandbags, the ruddy glow of a shell, and the blast of it bore Palmer onward, down into the trench, where he slammed his bayonet into a German, up to the very muzzle of his rifle. He tried to withdraw his weapon, but it stuck fast and all his strength could not free it. The book says that in such a case the piece should be fired, and this will free the bayonet. Palmer fired the piece. At the sound of the shot there were exclamations behind him and a sound of feet clattering. Palmer tugged again at his bayonet with no success. He threw a despairing look over his shoulder. There was a dugout entrance behind him, and men were coming up the stairs. Palmer heaved again at the bayonet. Then the men came into view and Palmer gave a sigh of relief. They had white diamonds sewed on their gas mask covers.

"Here!" cried the leader of the newcomers. "Where's your patrol? Whose your commander?"

"Lieutenant Glynn," said Palmer, recognizing Lieutenant Colville. "I don't know where they are, sir, we got separated by shell fire."

"Did they get in the trench? Are they here?"

"Push Dugan is. I saw him going through the wire. The rest I don't know about. I just killed a man, too." Palmer paused to swell his chest a bit.

"Where?" cried the lieutenant.

"Down the trench a ways. I seen him when I come in and rammed my bayonet clear through him."

"You're off your track," said one of the men. "When we come in this trench there wasn't a live Hun above ground."

"Well, there's my bayonet stickin' in him!" cried Palmer.

The men laughed loudly.

"You killed a stiff," said they. "Ain't you the brave boy!"

Palmer drew breath to protest, but thought better of it. The thing might be true. In fact he had a horrible feeling that it was. A shell burst in the very trench beside them, but they were in the dugout entrance, and though stones snapped on the wood, no one was hit.

"There!" cried Lieutenant Colville, "that settles that question. That's one of our batteries that's firing those shells. Those are shorts! Ah, the fools! They've lifted, you see, to fire on some rear trench and instead, they're socking them in here! Well, no use going out in the trench. We'll stay under cover. —— artillery!"

"Ain't it ——!" muttered some one, and Palmer with astounded glance, saw several of the men grin.

Eddies of smoke drifted by the door of the dugout, there was a faint taint of gas in the air, but no one put on his mask. A German trench at dusk is no place to put on a gas mask. A man is handicapped enough without blinding and suffocating himself in an apparatus of rubber.

"What's down the stairs?" asked Palmer of the man next to him.

"Nothin'," said the man. "Just bunks and stink. They was all in the trench for stand-to, and the bombardment dropped on 'em like a ton of brick."

"Did any of 'em get away?" asked Palmer.

"I hope not," said the man.

"Well, if they were all killed all our work goes for nothing," cried Palmer. "All the rehearsal and everything. Why, the whole reason for this —— madhouse was to capture prisoners, and if the boche were all killed, this million-dollar barrage is thrown away."

"Ain't it ——!" said some one again, and again the men grinned slyly.

"Come outta that!" roared a voice.

And lo, a man stood in the doorway with uplifted hand, in which was a grenade.

"Hey! Hey! Don't throw that!"

"Hey! Hey!"

"Don't throw that —— thing! Be yourself! We ain't Jerries!"

"Look out for that grenade. It might go off! Point it the other way for ——'s sake!"

The cries were all hurled simultaneously at the man in the door. Palmer recognized a member of his patrol. Lieutenant Colville did likewise.

"Where's the rest of your patrol?" asked the officer.

The man, seeing that the others were Americans, lowered his arm.

"They're right in back of me, sir," said he. "Them shells are sockin' in on the next traverse now, but all the Dutch in this one are dead."

"They're all dead, are they?" asked the lieutenant in a relieved tone. "Well, then, we'll go out."

THE men, ten of the first patrol and two of the second, went out into the trench. Shells were banging unpleasantly near. The noise and confusion where the barrage played on the rear trenches was terrible, but was far enough away so that the men could speak to each other without shouting. The officer leaped upon a pile of sandbags and looked over the parapet. The American lines were invisible through the drifting smoke, and forward in the opposite direction a gray and yellow wall of smoke and gas hid all that was passing. In the trench under foot were strewn sandbags, fragments of wood, blankets, overcoats, stick-grenades, belts, rifles, a regular city dump of all kinds of enemy *materiel*, and under and over all this débris was a great number of enemy dead. A little way down the trench Palmer's rifle stood upright, butt skyward, still held in that position by its bayonet. The bombardment had caught the German garrison as it lined the parapet for stand-to and had annihilated it. From beyond the next traverse came faint shouting and the banging of grenades. A patrol was at work there. There was a sudden sound of running feet and men panting.

"This must be Trotter's patrol," said Colville. "This way, men! Here we are!"

The rear wall of the trench seemed to suddenly give way and dirt, stones, revetting material and sandbags flowed into the trench, followed by a thick cluster of black objects that must be men.

"Hi! Boche!" cried some one, and Palmer was smitten to earth by a great weight.

"Hey!" cried Palmer, "let me up!" He was at the bottom of a pile of a hundred men at least. He groaned. It seemed that every bone in his body must be broken. A foot trod upon his outstretched hand.

"Look out where you're stepping, for ——'s sake!" cried Palmer. "Let me up. I'm on the bottom! Hey, let me up!"

He saw feet stamping by his nose—now feet with flapping trouser legs, now feet with puttees at the ankles. The trench was gloomy with smoke and the falling night, but these feet were right in his face almost and he could see them clearly. They were in his nose, too. The weight upon him did not grow less.

"Help!" cried Palmer, "get off me, you —— fools! Pull these guys off, they're killin' me!"

He heard grunting and the thud of bodies falling.

"There's for you, ye Sassenach ——!" cried a voice that must belong to Dugan. "Show that to yer king fer the mark of an honest man's hand!"

The struggle ended with the suddenness of such affairs, and no sound was heard save men panting as after a race.

"How's things?" asked a new voice.

"That you, Glynn?" asked Lieutenant Colville. "How are you making out? You didn't need to run up on our account. We handled these lads very well, not a prisoner in the bunch. They must have come out of a dugout. Let's bomb a few for luck."

"Any one hurt?" asked Lieutenant Glynn, who had come up with the rest of his patrol.

"Let's see, sound off your names, men! Who the —— is this pig under a gate?"

"It's Palmer," said Dugan. "Sure he do have thrun himself down in the thrinch with all the Germans in the world on top." They pulled three dead Germans off Palmer, and helped him sputtering to his feet.

"These sausage spoilers jumped on to us from the *parados*," said Colville. "I saw them against the sky for an instant before they jumped and let jam with my pistol. These three are my turkeys. Look at that one! That's the kind of a hole a forty-five makes in a man. You'd think he'd been hit by a locomotive!"

"Well, let's get going and get this over with," said Lieutenant Glynn. "Trotter's H company gang is right in back of us."

"Come on," agreed the other officer, "you go that way and I'll go this. We'll bomb a few dugouts and drag out of here. We're due to catch a counter barrage any minute. It may be going now. I can't tell, our guns make such a racket!"

"There are about a hundred shells a minute landing over there," remarked Lieutenant Glynn, "they ought to make a racket. I'm glad they're not landing on this trench. Whoever was dropping those shorts has got on to himself."

"If he'd only kept on droppin' 'em," muttered some one, "we could have stayed right in the dugout an' never come out 'til it was time to go home."

The two patrols separated, Colville's going west along the trench to secure the entrance of the communication trench against invaders and Lieutenant Glynn's going east in search of prisoners and booty. Palmer and Dugan were the last in line and were suddenly startled by two figures taking form from the blackness of the dugout where the first patrol had sheltered themselves.

"Who's that?" cried Palmer.

"It's me," said a solemn voice.

"Is that you, Dopey?" cried Dugan. "You rise from the murk like the devil come for his quarter's rent. "Who's that overright the door?"

"My prisoner," said Dopey, "I found him under a bunk. If he had a little more wool on him, you'd think he was a lamb."

"Sure he smells like a goat," said Dugan.

"Dopey's the goat, not him," remarked Palmer. "Did you hear those birds in H company's patrol? Ain't they the scurves! 'We could have stayed in the dugout,' says they, 'until it was time to go home.' And another guy says to me, 'There's nothin' in here but bunks and stink!' The liar! An' a dead Hun as big as a house at the bottom of the stair! Didn't we hear 'em bombin' the place when we was out in No Man's Land?"

"Well, they ain't to be blamed," said Dopey. "Stand still, you, or I'll shove your teeth right out through the back of your head!" The prisoner, thus admonished, although he did not understand a word of what was said, though he might gather the meaning from the tone, stood perfectly still.

PALMER looked at him more closely. The prisoner was a smooth-faced boy, a small, chubby-faced lad of fifteen years or so. His white neck came out of the collar of his blouse like a plant out of a flower pot. His sleeves were turned back at the wrists, and the dirty lining made a strange looking cuff. He wore high leather boots that scraped on the dugout sill as he moved uneasily. Even with his great bucket-like trench helmet, he did not quite come to Dopey's shoulder, and Dopey was not a very tall man. The prisoner looked at them with a conciliating grin, albeit his eyes, shaded as they were by his helmet, seemed to shift about a little nervously.

"Let's folly on after the patrol," said Dugan, " 'tis unhealthy to be standin' still in the night air."

"What'll we do with this prisoner?" asked Palmer.

"Why, bring him along!" cried the other two. "Ain't he what we come after?"

"Listen," cried Palmer, "you two babes in the wood! We come after prisoners right enough, but the guy that takes the first one goes home with old Vinegar Face as his dog-robber. Remember that? Well, H company is lookin' out that no one in their patrol takes the first one. They ain't goin' to take any! And so let's be careful we don't take any, either. This bird may not be the first one, but we don't need to take chances."

The other two muttered profane surprize. What a low-down, scabby, unmoral gang that H company was! They ought to all be in Leavenworth!

"What'll we do with this guy then?" asked Dopey.

"Let's kill him," said Palmer, "an' then there won't be no question."

"All right," agreed the other two. "You do it."

"Me? Why me? You took him, Dope! You kill him. I ain't got any gun anyway."

"Here they are!" cried a voice. "What the —— are you doing here? Gold-bricking? Hiding out, huh?"

There was a swift movement and a clattering noise. The prisoner had been hurled bodily down the stairs.

"We were just cleanin' out this big dugout," said Palmer, "and there wasn't no one in it, sir!"

"Well, come on! There's work to do yet! We thought you were killed and had to come way back here to find out what the matter was. Get a move on! We can't stay in this trench all night!"

The lieutenant seized Palmer and gave him a shove along the trench and the other two followed. They hurried along the trench to a large bay where the other members of the second patrol and some of the third patrol were waiting. Some of the men were collecting belts and helmets from the bottom of the trench and a man was passing Lieutenant Trotter a handful of what seemed to be paper. It was probably letters, diaries and so on gleaned from the dead Germans. A man suddenly dashed around a traverse.

"Hey!" he cried, "there's a whole flock o' dugouts down this trench and one of 'em's big as a house and full o' Huns!" Without a word every one shoved his way along the trench and, coming to a communication trench that bore the sign "*Regimentsrichter —zu Altdorf Graben,*" they turned off after their guide. There was a clattering of pistol shots followed by silence.

"Any one hurt?" called Lieutenant Glynn.

"No, sir, just a couple of Jerries comin' up to see what all the row was about."

"Here's the dugouts!" cried Palmer, nudging Dopey. There were three dugout entrances visible. Two of them had been wrecked and the doorway was piled with shattered timber, heaps of dirt and twisted sheets of corrugated iron. The third was untouched, and gaped blackly at the Americans.

"Do you want to ask them out?" inquired Lieutenant Trotter, turning to the other officer.

"You do it," called Lieutenant Glynn from his place some distance off. "It was your patrol that discovered the dugout. I don't want to rob you of your glory."

There was a moment of indecision.

"There!" said Palmer, nudging Dopey again, "they're in on it, too. They're just as wise as any of us. What's that?"

Something that sounded like a large stone was heard rattling down the dugout stairs. All the men made a sudden movement backward, and the sharp bark of a grenade, somewhat muffled, followed.

"Who threw that bomb?" cried Lieutenant Trotter with anger.

"I dropped it by accident, sir, I had it in my hand an' it just fell out!"

"By ——, the rockpile for you!" roared the officer. "There goes a good chance to take a prisoner! That bomb will wreck any one that's in there! I'll fix you for this when we get back!"

His tone was full of rage, but there was a false note in it, like that given by a counterfeit coin when it is rung on metal. The men of Glynn's patrol muttered angrily to themselves.

"They want us to ask them Jerries out an' then claim we took 'em! Well, they can just go right plumb to ——. We ain't such fools as we look!"

Darkness had continued to gather and the men in the trench had now some difficulty in seeing. Smoke kept floating toward them from the barrage that cut off the front line trench from any attempt at counter attack. The second and third patrols were in a communication trench that led back to the second line, and eventually to where the barrage stirred the dirt into pudding.

Neither officer made any move. The divisional staff had spent weeks in planning the raid, the men of the patrols had dug the dummy trenches and then rehearsed the attack in them day after day; the artillery had prepared visibility maps, barrage maps and fire tables, and were now working themselves black in the face firing a barrage. All this effort, all this planning had one object in view—the capture of prisoners.

The members of the patrols, now that they had arrived in the trench, were very averse to capture any. Each officer was willing that the other patrol should take prisoners, but he wanted none of the members of his patrol to do so. In a National Guard company the men are close to their officers, and an officer knows that if he lives he must go home and spend the rest of his life in the same town with his men. And these men had not the thought that they were in an enemy trench, that the minutes were ticking swiftly by and that somewhere German minds were working frantically to find out where the Americans were and, having found out, to devise some method of destroying them before they could get back to their own lines again. No, the Americans had but one thought, that the colonel with the cold blue eyes and wrinkled face was a Bad Guy from Bloody Gulch, and that the man that took the first prisoner was to be dog-robber to said Bad Guy for an indefinite period.

"WELL, let's go home," suggested Lieutenant Trotter. "We aren't doing any good here."'

"We can't go until Colville gives the word or we hear the trumpeter blowing First Call," objected the other officer.

"How the —— are we going to hear a trumpeter in here?"

"The stretcher bearers are posted across No Man's Land as connecting files, and they're supposed to tip us off."

"Well, where do you suppose Colville is?" cried Lieutenant Glynn.

"He's in a dugout somewhere, you can bet on that," replied the other. "He never gets his feet wet, that bird. He's got the duty of blocking his end of the trench against any reinforcements and that lets him out of any necessity of taking prisoners or making explanations as to why he hasn't taken any."

"Suppose we go along the front line a way and see what we can take back for souvenirs. I don't like monkeying around in these communication trenches. We might get lost."

"That's all the good all our diggin' the dummy trenches did," observed Dopey.

"Well, the dummy thrinch was not all blown into the likeness of a Connemara sunk-fence, and there was no alleys leadin' off it. An' sure there was no Germans killed to the bone in the bottom of it. I have the fear to put foot to the ground to step on their face."

"Down the main trench a way," ordered Lieutenant Glynn. "We'd better stay out of these communication trenches. They're damp and cold."

The patrols turned about and went back into the front line. Hunks of the parapet had been torn away, and in places a man could see the American lines without getting on the fire step. The Germans had a barrage going of their own now, but it was over on the sector in front of which the dummies had appeared. Jerry was striking savagely, like an enraged rattler. The American front line twinkled like a wet trolley wire, and though the enemy did not know where the Americans in his own trench were, he knew where they were in the American trenches, and in the American back areas, too.

Echelon, truck park, divisional command post, and all the roads leading thereto, the enemy shelled. This is called retaliation fire. It did considerable damage. A truck convoy was trapped on a road and burned, a week's ration of hay and oats went up in flames, traffic was disorganized and telephone wires throughout the sector were destroyed. Liaison between the front line trench from which the raiders had come, and the brigade P.C. where the colonel was abruptly ceased. Liaison also ceased between both the brigade P. C. and Major Vincent's dugout and the artillery.

In the German trench the Americans proceeded eastward.

"When I get my next pay I'm going to get some artilleryman drunk," said Palmer. "They did as fine a job on this front line as a man could ask. The dugouts are all caved in and the boche are all dead."

"Here's a dugout!" cried Dopey.

Blong!

"Come out of that!" called Lieutenant Glynn.

Silence.

"Throw down another one!" he directed.

Again the sound of the grenade, like a firecracker under a tin can.

"He throws the grenade first and asks 'em out afterward. That's usin' his bean!" said Dopey. The file of men came to a halt and Dopey looked about for a place to rest. There was a seat let into the wall here, quite an elaborate affair, that must have whiled away many a weary day of trench life in the construction. It was built of small strips of wood, with a curved back, and roofed with plank. It looked much like the place where the baseball players sit under a grandstand. It was perhaps the place where the officer in command sat during stand-to or where the non-coms of the guard rested. Dopey sat down upon it and heaved a sigh of comfort. Palmer sat beside him. From the western end of the trench came the slam of grenades, and a few pistol shots.

"Colville's acceptin' some one's surrender," said Palmer. He looked up at the roof of the little shelter and then sidewise at the wall. There was a shelf there, and upon the shelf was a large curved can, a sort of dinner pail, only flatter. It had a bail or handle to carry it by.

"Come on," said Dopey, "we're goin' again! Some one's all broke out with ambition. We gotta explore some more."

The two men got groaning to their feet and went down the trench.

"Say," cried Palmer suddenly, "that flat can, that dinner pail thing—that was a Jerry mess-kit."

"Well, what of it?" asked Dopey.

"Why, I haven't got any. Don't you remember H company made love to mine on me? Aw hop! Why didn't I grab on to it!"

"Where did you see this here mess-kit?"

"Back in that place where we sat down."

"Well, go back an' get it," said Dopey.

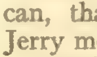
"Sure, why not?" agreed Palmer. "Mess-kits don't grow on every bush."

He turned and began to shove his way back past the other men of the patrol.

"Where yuh goin'?" they asked him.

"I seen a Jerry mess-kit back here I want. I'll be right back," answered Palmer.

"Look out some boche don't reach out an' flatten yuh!" said the men.



PALMER, once clear of the patrol, hurried back to the seat. The mess-kit was still there and he seized it eagerly. It rattled. He pulled off the cover and found the mess-kit was empty of food, but it had something else in it. He felt of this object in the darkness. It was a tiny aluminum cup. The mess-kit also contained a thing like a stick, which was a knife and fork that fitted into each other's handles and a spoon. Palmer put them all back, put the cover on and ran his belt through the handle so that he could carry it with both hands free. Then he listened a moment before rejoining the patrol to see how far down the trench they were. How quiet it was here! There was heavy shelling going on, but it was behind him.

"Now what the ——!" muttered Palmer.

He walked down the trench a few steps to where all semblance of parapet and parados had been lost and scrambled out of the trench upon the ground behind. There was still a thick black mass at some distance where the smoke of the barrage hung heavily, but no sound came from this smoke, there was no twinkle of exploding shell. The American barrage had stopped.

The German artillery, having slammed loose on the roads and having shot up every ration dump and echelon in the sector, finding that the American artillery did not quit, began to search for the batteries that were firing. In the last glow of the twilight they ran up a balloon and began to register on the American batteries. In a minute or two the balloon was pulled down again, and the German gunners went to work.

The Americans hung on for a while, but things got too hot, too many men were being hit, too many guns were being destroyed. The commander of the artillery was appealed to; he in turn tried to get a message to the brigade, but the wires were out. Another appeal came in and on its heels the report that several batteries were out of action, their commanders having ceased fire on their own initiative. What to do? Where was the patrol, in the German trenches or not?

"The plan allowed," decided the artillery commander, "for a thirty-minute bombardment after the barrage lifted at the twenty-fifth minute. It's the fifty-first minute now, isn't it? Well, the infantry ought to be on their way home, and if they aren't they will be soon. Cease firing!"

Those batteries that still had wire communication were notified by wire, and those that had no wire working were notified by runner. The artillery went for their dugouts, and the enemy, having silenced the batteries, ceased to shell them, transferring his fire to the roads again.

Palmer stood on the level ground behind the trench. To the east he could hear occasional grenades and muffled shouts, where the second and third patrols bombed the dugouts. They ought to be getting back pretty soon. The plan did not contemplate clearing more than a hundred yards of trench. A blue rocket hissed into the night from the German second line.

"Man," muttered Palmer, "it's time we went home. This sector is workin' like a barrel o' hard cider!"

A handful of flares went up and Palmer instinctively ducked. From the west, where Lieutenant Colville had camouflaged his patrol, there was a rattle of shots. This patrol had been shooting off and on all the time, and Palmer suspected them of firing their pistols in air. This time, however, the fusillade continued. It increased in fury. Then a new sound broke forth from that end of the trench that sucked every drop of blood in Palmer's body right straight to his heart. It was the dry savage cackle of a machine gun.

It was dark where Palmer stood, but not black. He seemed to be on a hill or a platform, a sort of reviewing stand, whence he could see all about him. The wind was cold, and it bore with it a smell of stale food, old clothes and foul, dirty dens. The gas and the smoke had been blown away or had settled into the deeper levels of the trenches, and the old four-year-old smell of them had returned.

"Ha!" cried Palmer.

What had seemed to be a rock or a wooden box, suddenly moved upward, followed by some dark mass. A man had climbed out of a hole or trench just in front. Palmer gasped again, and he felt as if his veins were filled with ice-water instead of blood. Palmer remembered now that he had left his rifle sticking in a man that had had no need of a bayonet to finish him, and that he was without arms. The man advanced from the trench. He was no friend, there was no white diamond on his breast and his helmet was too large and black and hood-like to belong to any but a German.

Palmer turned and fled. In the darkness he might get away, might even stumble across a rifle or a grenade, in which case he would cease to flee. The trench that he had left should be near, and he could jump into it. He took about six leaps. There was no trench, and he, perforce, continued his flight. There was a tramping behind him. The German pursued.

The German trenches were beginning to hum. Flares were being fired with the utmost exuberance. The Germans, by a hurried checking up of their front line, discovered that the point of entry had been somewhere between two certain sectors and that if the garrisons of these two points were to advance respectively east and west, they would trap the invaders in the trench. Unfortunately the east end of the front line had been considerably shattered by the fake bombardment, and in the shattering a considerable number of the garrison had been strewn about themselves. The survivors waited for reinforcements before doing any advancing. These reinforcements had to come up from the reserve positions, itself a difficult thing, for the barrage that had held them up before, had destroyed trenches and caved in dugouts and caused general consternation. However, the barrage having ceased, nothing restrained them except the difficulty of finding their way through the shattered communication trenches.

PALMER continued to churn up the ground with his hobnails, and the cutlery in his German mess kit rattled merrily. His pursuer pounded after him. Palmer found no rifles, no grenades; the ground was bare. Suddenly before him lay a black streak, a wide band like a narrow carpet. A trench! Palmer leaped into it, rushed down it, came to an intersecting trench, doubled to the right, and dived into a dugout. He tried to hold his breath while he listened. If he could only get a minute to fix that —— mess kit!

The mysterious machine gun barked incessantly, he could hear shouting, rifles cracking, men calling to each other, but no sound of his pursuer. Good. He had shaken him off. But suppose there were more in this dugout? Palmer reached out his hand to feel for the side of the stairway. He felt a shelf and the shelf was full of boxes. On the other side was another shelf, and at the back within easy reach was a pile of large cases.

"This ain't a dugout," thought Palmer, "this is a dump."

A rocket dump, perhaps, or a grenade dump. No place for a man to hide, for if a shell or a grenade landed anywhere near, the occupant of that dump might take a short flight through the air. Palmer turned to go out, but stopped in his tracks. There was a man in the doorway.

"Can he see me or not?" thought Palmer, holding his breath.

Probably not, for Palmer could scarce see the man, and the man certainly could not see into that black closet. The man, however, gave a kind of a short grunt, and began to feel about the interior of the dump with his hand. It rattled over the boxes on the shelves, it brushed the jamb of the doorway, it groped before Palmer's face. The dump was shallow and the man had only to step over the threshold to reach the back of it. Palmer shrunk away from the groping hand, and his hobnails made a crunching sound on the floor. Instantly the other's hand was upon his shoulder.

"Fool," thought Palmer, as a drowning man thinks of trifles, "of course he could see the diamond on my mask and as long as I ran, the other one on my back! An' me rattlin' like a truck, too!"

The other man clucked softly.

"*Kamerade!*" said he.

A bright light gleamed outside in the trench. There was a flare overhead. Two grenades exploded near-by. There was something familiar about the German, thought Palmer. Yes, indeed. He was the young kid with the skinny neck that Dopey had kicked down the dugout stairs.

"Who's the *kamerade*, you or me?" asked Palmer.

The German kid spoke softly and gently. It was quite clear he had not understood what Palmer had said, nor could Palmer understand him. The German ended his little speech, took a short breath, and then said "*kamerade*" again. This time he held his hands up to show that he meant it. The German's figure was outlined by another flare.

"Here," said Palmer, "let me out!" He stepped quickly to the door and looked down the trench. It was a narrow alley, but at the far end was a wider one, and the light of the flare showed running figures in the farther trench. They were Americans, for Palmer could see the white diamonds on their uniforms. "Look, Hans," said he, turning to the German. "I ain't the guy you're looking for. Dopey McKnight is the guy that took you prisoner. I never had a thing to do with it. You wait here and I'll tell Dopey to come and get you."

The kid smiled at Palmer and said softly—

"*Kamerade.*"

Suddenly, as if a curtain had been rolled over it, the boy's face hardened, the smile vanished. His eyes were raised to the ground above the trench and Palmer swung about to see what he was looking at. A big Hun stood there, a big, broad-shouldered, mustached Hun. He had a stick grenade in his upraised hand and as Palmer looked, he hurled it directly into the open doorway. The flare went out. Darkness. Again Palmer fled, marveling that he was still alive.

Slam!

Palmer came to the trench in which he had seen the Americans. They were there, just around the corner, shoving each other out of the trench.

"Who's that?" cried some one in a strained voice.

"Sounds like a cow in a swamp," said another.

"It's one of our guys," answered several at once. "He's cleaned out a Jerry kitchen. Listen to the pans rattlin'."

"It's me, Palmer. What the —— is comin' off?"

"Ten of my patrol O.K.," said Lieutenant Glynn. "We're all complete now."

"Trotter's gone with his. Up with you now, Glynn, take 'em home. Follow the stretcher bearers. What the —— is that? Did you see?"

A ruddy glow leaped high behind them, lighting up the struggling Americans. There was a sound of frying, of roaring flames.

"I know what that is!" cried Palmer. "There was a Jerry heaved a grenade into a rocket dump and he must have set it on fire."

"Good enough," said Lieutenant Colville, "that'll block that trench. They were coming after us down there. That's the only way they can get at us. Come on, men, let's go. To —— with all those packs and junk, we've got our necks to think of."

The men threw down their booty, their German belts, knapsacks and weapons, and clambered over the trench, stumbling and slipping.

The fire mounted higher, lighting up their white faces and making their eyes gleam as they looked over their shoulders. Finally they were over the parapet, Lieutenant Colville last of all, when there was a roar of rage and a body of Germans appeared on the far side of the the trench. The American officer emptied his pistol at them; they retreated, and he ran after his men.

* * *

THE three patrols were grouped in a hollow just below the German trenches. Lieutenant Colville came rushing down to them and called for the other two officers.

"Let's have a look before we go charging across this field," said the commander of the first patrol. "There's no use trying to swim through a wave of machine-gun fire. We'll be safe for a minute or two as long as that fire burns."

"What'll prevent them from coming along the front line?" asked Lieutenant Trotter nervously.

"There was a bunch of about thirty jumped us the minute our guns quit firing," said Colville, "but we'd found a machine-gun, set it up, tied down the thumb-pieces with wire and come away. It kicked itself over the next minute probably, but they think we've got a gun there and so they'll be slow about coming along the trench. Did any one come from your end, Glynn?"

"No. They're raising —— with machine-guns and flares, though."

"I don't hear anything going overhead," said Lieutenant Colville, "let's make a dash for it. Be careful not to knock over any trip-flares, and if any lights go up near at hand, flop! I wish I knew what those —— idiots in the P.C. are thinking of. They know we're out here in the dark somewhere and not so much as a cap-pistol going to create a little diversion for us. Tear off those —— white things, you can see them a mile!" Hurriedly the men stripped the pieces of white cloth from each other.

"By ——, do you know why they aren't shooting at us? They can't get the dummies out of their minds. They're shooting where they saw the dummies come up!"

"Let's go!" cried Lieutenant Colville. "Keep track of your men, we don't want to leave any one behind!"

"Follow me, men," shouted Lieutenant Trotter. His patrol leaped out from the ground and began to run toward their own lines, crouching low.

"Where the —— are those —— stretcher bearers?" muttered the officer to himself.

It was useless for the patrol to run blindly toward the American lines. There would be wire to cross and now that the men of the patrols had removed their distinguishing marks they would be in considerable danger of being shot by their own men. The officer knelt and ordered the men to halt. He must look around for a second. Behind him he could hear the other patrols.

"Every one here?" he asked. "Get your breath." To make sure he counted the dark blots against a background of darkness. What the ——! "Whose the extra man? What patrol are you from?"

"What extra man?" muttered the patrol. There was no extra man with them! There was some low talking, excited cursing and then open conversation.

"Kill the ——!"

"Don't shoot, for ——'s sake. Every Hun in the sector will see yuh!"

"Bat him over the head wit' your rifle!"

"Here!" cried the officer. "What's the matter here? Shut up, all of you! What's the trouble now? One man at a time!"

"There's a —— Hun hangin' around us tryin' to surrender himself," answered some one sullenly. "I'm fer killin' him wit' a rock! A rock won't make no noise!"

The officer had a twinge of fear. Must his patrol be the goat? Still he could not countenance the killing of this prisoner. The lieutenant had taken an oath to be loyal to his superiors. Moreover, while he might not exert himself unreasonably to secure prisoners, he could hardly allow his men to kill one in cold blood, even if it did not destroy the fruits of the entire operation. Then he saw a way out.

"That prisoner belongs to Lieutenant Colville's patrol," said the officer sternly. "What do you mean by trying to claim that he was taken by us? That's not sportsmanship. Take him back where he belongs!"

There was a short silence, while the men paid silent admiration to their officer. Then one of the men spoke humbly.

"Sir, I'll take him right back. I c'n see the other patrol from here."

"The rest of you come on!" cried Lieutenant Trotter, and went forward again.

The soldier that had seized the prisoner by the collar, dragged him a little way and pointed him at what looked like a number of very clumsy dogs. These clumsy dogs were the other two patrols, going along on all fours looking for the line of stretcher bearers that was supposed to be left in No Man's Land to guide them home.

"See them?" said the soldier.

He held the German's head in the indicated direction for a second and then gave him a lusty boost with his foot to start him on the right track. Then the American rejoined his own patrol.

PALMER, Dopey, and Push Dugan crawled along together. They grunted and swore as they scraped their hands and knocked their knees against rocks and the various kinds of junk with which the ground was strewn.

"What the —— is that clatterin' sound?" demanded Dopey. "You worn through to the bone Palmer?"

"No," said Palmer, "it's my Jerry mess-kit I got slung on my belt."

"What the —— are you luggin' a mess-kit around for? Are you nuts complete?"

"No, but I'm shy a mess-kit, and this one I got stays with me 'til I get a better one."

"You'll get us all killed clatterin' it around!"

"Well, if I throw it away I'm liable to starve to death."

"Mother o' me!" groaned Dugan as the patrol halted for a moment, while the two officers made another attempt to get their bearings, "sorrow folly the man that told me to be a foot soldier so that I'd have no horse for the cleaning. The whole pack of us do be lost!"

"Cheer up," said Palmer. "As long as the boche try to kill our dummies for us we aint dead. Who's that?"

The first patrol was a little separated from the second, it being easier to keep track of the men that way, and the first patrol was halted and lying down to the right front. The night was quite clear, though there was no moon, the smoke of the barrage had long since drifted away, and the men of the second patrol could see the line of lumps—lumps that quivered and changed form like jelly-fish on a beach—that showed where the first patrol waited. A man, walking upright, was seen to approach the first patrol.

" 'Tis one o' them ——!" whispered Dugan.

"It is for sure," agreed Palmer. "It's the little guy that Dopey captured."

"You're a liar!" cried Dopey.

The other patrol broke into rapid and husky whispering. They sounded like the scenes in the theatre where a mob is heard in the distance. There was a deep low sound of angry muttering—words hissed like snakes; there were snarls of rage. The man who stood on his feet turned in a dazed way and stumbled off. Then he must have seen the second patrol, for he turned and came toward it eagerly.

"Oh ——!" cried Palmer, "here he comes! Git him outta here, Dopey. You took him in the first place!"

"You lie like ——!" cried Dopey.

The German continued to advance. He was, after all, just a kid and a very undernourished, size Double Zero kid at that.

"*Besorgen zie nicht!*" said he softly, and they could almost see him smile. "*Kamerade!*"

"Here's an Irish rose for ye, ye blagyard!" muttered Dugan, and hurled a stone at the shadowy form.

Instant approval from the patrol. There was a scratching sound, grunting, rattling of the stones landing and little thudding sounds of some of them striking the German. He clucked once or twice like a frightened hen and then disappeared in the shadows.

The two officers meanwhile held a council of war in a shell hole slightly in advance of their patrols.

"If we go in," said Lieutenant Colville, "we'll strike the American wire somewhere. Well, you know what will happen as well as I do. They'll all let jam and wait 'til morning to see who it was that made the noise. If we try to yell to them, the boche will hear us and we'll get the Order of the Shovel just the same. All this rehearsal and sweat and blood and struggle, all that million dollar barrage, and here we are out in No Man's Land with the whole German army hunting for us, no prisoner, no nothing, and not a shell fired to keep the Jerries off our backs!"

"What kind of —— fools do you think there are in the different P.C.s?" cried Lieutenant Glynn. "They know we ought to be back. Its the fortieth minute now, and we were due back at the thirtieth. You'd think they'd lay a few on the Jerry trenches just for luck!"

"Wait!" gasped Colville. "I'm a fool! Why for ——'s sake I didn't think of it before, I don't know. Remember a red flare was to be the signal if we couldn't get back? Fire the flare! The whole regiment is standing to arms to come out and get us if we get into trouble! Let's get a rifle and fire the flare!"

"The boche will hear it," objected the other officer. "I've had my flare in my hand for five minutes, but the boche will hear it fired and we're gone geese!"

"We're gone anyway," said Colville.

He crawled out of the shell hole and back to the patrol, where he took the rifle from the first man he came to.

IN THE big dugout marked "Hotel Van Ness," the old colonel sat grimly at a table with a watch in his hand. One or two other officers sat silently about on the bunks. The colonel's face was calm, but his lips drew more and more into a straight line. The raiders should have been back long ago. At the top of the dugout stairs on the fire step of the trench, Major Vincent looked into No Man's Land. It was black and silent and cold. To left and right the major could hear the subdued clashing of equipment and the low muttering of talking men where the entire American garrison stood to arms. The German artillery was very active, the clatter of their machine guns was continual. This brought a ray of hope to the major for, if the patrol had been captured or destroyed, the Germans would have quieted down. The major shivered. How cold the night was!

In the dugout the telephone buzzed. Swifter than a striking snake the colonel had the receiver to his ear. Wire communication at last!

"Fitchburg speaking," began a voice.

This was the artillery command post code name.

"—— you," said the colonel, his voice shaking with rage, "give me a barrage! A barrage! Do you hear?"

Now, in the artillery after any shooting has been done, the guns are always relaid on Normal Barrage, that is, they are resighted so that fire can be instantly opened on the most threatened point in case of an enemy attack. The word "barrage" was shrieked from the receiver into the ear of the officer that held it at the artillery P.C.; he in his turn shrieked it again, sixteen telephone operators at as many batteries repeated it, and the barrage was on. The gun crews sleep under their guns. The gunner simply reaches up and pulls the toggle, the gun is fired, and by the time the gun is loaded again he is on his seat and ready.

In No Man's Land Lieutenant Colville prepared the flare. *Bang!* It was away, a red jewel against the blue black night. In the trench, Major Vincent saw it and his whistle began its moaning. The first parties of the regiment started to make their way down through the wire, machine guns and one pounders were prepared to fire a barrage on the German trenches at an instant's warning.

Simultaneously the barrage that the colonel had called for arrived with the crash of an orchestral chord. It did not land, as the colonel had intended, on its previous target, the German communicating trenches, but on Normal Barrage, in this case directly in front of the American wire. The regiment went back into its dugouts at once to escape the flying splinters. Major Vincent wanted to weep, but instead, turned and leaped the whole flight of stairs from top to bottom.

"Telephone!" he shouted.

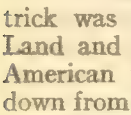
He spun the crank and clapped the receiver to his ear.

"Fitchburg! Fitchburg!" he yelled.

The receiver was as silent as the tomb. The wire was out again.

The Germans also saw the flare. The officers that lined the trench with field glasses, sweeping the ground where the dummies had appeared, the artillery observation posts in shattered trees and ruined houses, far behind the front lines, the scouting patrols that crawled out in front of the wire—all saw the flare and many of them saw the flash of the rifle that fired it.

There was a sudden silence in the German lines while the guns were swung on the new target. Then the Americans laid down their barrage in front of their own trenches. The Germans paused, hesitated. What trick was this? A flare from No Man's Land and then a barrage in front of the American wire! Quickly the word went down from *Ober-kommando* to *Kommandantur* to front line to relay the guns on their original targets. The Germans had been fooled once that night by a fake bombardment; it would not happen again. Meanwhile send a strong patrol to see who had fired that flare.



AT THE first shell from the American batteries, some men leaped to their feet at a little distance from where the American patrols lay and dashed toward them.

"Who's there?" cried Lieutenant Glynn. "Halt!"

The running men kept on, however, and the officer fired twice at them before he saw the shape of their helmets against the skyline. The newcomers dashed into the patrols, who received them profanely. The two officers crawled rapidly toward the place where the new men had lain down.

"Where the —— did you come from?" they cried. "Who the —— are you?"

"We're the stretcher bearers," they panted. "We was lyin' out there waitin' an' no one showed up an' we didn't dare go back an' we didn't know what to do. Then we saw the flare go off an' knew you guys were over here."

"Do you know the way back?"

"Sure! Broggi and Baker are still over there!"

"We can't go through the barrage anyway," said Lieutenant Trotter, who had run over with his patrol.

"They must have seen the flare," said Lieutenant Colville. "They'll know we're in trouble. The major will shut that barrage off in a minute. Let's not get excited now. The trench in back of us is all knocked to bits, and they won't go hunting around now trying to dig out machine guns. Let's move over into the line of stretcher bearers anyway, so that we can make a dash in the instant the barrage stops."

The patrols were moved over nearly a hundred yards to where two prone, shuddering stretcher bearers indicated the place of entry into the American lines, now, alas, shrouded in smoke and screened by flying hunks of steel.

"Lie down, every one," directed the officers, "and when the barrage quits we'll all make a dash for home. Keep your heads, men. We're all right. This is just a little noise!"

"He-e-e-e-ey!" came a faint hail from the rearmost men—that is, those nearest the German lines, "here come the boche!"

"——!" said the three officers, the six stretcher bearers, and the thirty men, less the two that had first seen the enemy.

A counter attack had been organized in the German second line immediately after the barrage had ceased on that portion of the enemy trenches. This counter attack had advanced to the German first line and found nothing. Here the officer in command had witnessed the flare, the sudden falling of the American barrage in front of its own trench, and had immediately leaped to the conclusion that the American attack had struck a snag.

This officer had the satisfaction of knowing that the sector he had passed through was the one that had been raided, the number of bayoneted dead, the sudden breaking out of fire in the rocket store, the pile of booty thrown down by the Americans when they left the trench, the man who had thrown the grenade at Palmer, all told him where the raid had passed. Now this flare and this barrage! The raiders must be out there in the dark, cut off from their own lines! The German officer led his men down through the wire.

"Where are they?" asked Colville, running over to the men who had called.

"There! Over there! See 'em crawlin'?"

The officer saw them plainly. Something struck him on the shoulder and then fell to the ground. He reached down swiftly, and blindly and by luck felt what he sought, a stick-grenade. He tossed it away, even with the tips of his fingers and it exploded in air.

"——!" said the lieutenant in a shaky voice, "that was a near one. Here, men! Let's have a little rifle fire on those Jerries over there. See 'em?" The American rifles began to crack.

"Shove along," cried Dopey, "git that bolt to workin'! Never mind waitin' to pick a target. Shoot at the black of 'em."

"—— as thore!" moaned Dugan. "I haven't enough bullets for the downing of a duck. Sure I shot them all away down the dugouts!"

"You ain't the only one either," said Palmer, who lay between the two. "Hark to the officers sounding off and not a rifle goin' any more!"

Consternation reigned in the patrols. The men had gone out to the raid depending on the bayonet alone and carrying only five rounds of rifle ammunition apiece. Many of the men had shot theirs away in the German trenches and their grenades had been expended in the same manner. The others had now fired their last shot. It takes a very little time to empty the magazine of a rifle or pistol. The officers looked sadly behind them where the American barrage still rumbled faithfully, and then to the front where the black mass of Germans seemed to be growing larger and more solid every second.

"They're goin' to rush us!" said Glynn hoarsely.

"There'll be a flock of new widows in five minutes," said Dugan, unfixing his bayonet and seizing it like a dagger. "There'll be lots of them Americans, but faith I think there'll be at least one of them a German!"

Another grenade exploded with a sheet of flame, and some one in the German lines fired a flare. The flare was defective and only burned for a second or two, but by its light the Germans saw the Americans, the Americans saw the Germans, and Dopey, Dugan, and Palmer saw a short distance in front of them three men with a long black object like a pencil lying on the ground.

"It's a machine gun!" they cried.

"Look out, gang, they've got a gun over here!" yelled Palmer. The flare went out. The three leaped to their feet and ran toward the patrols, but the light machine-gun had gone into action. Its gunner saw the three running figures against the background of the barrage flame. Bullets began to spat around the men.

"Duck! Duck!" cried Dopey. "Lay down! They're shootin' at us!"

The three flung themselves down and began to crawl back toward their own men. There was a grunt from Palmer and a sound of scraping tin.

"My —— mess-kit's caught on a root!" he gasped.

The bullets snapped into the ground. There were several sounds like a man striking a carpet with a beater.

"Palmer!" cried the other two, "Palmer! Are ye hit?" There was no reply.

IN THE Hotel Van Ness dugout the major howled and shrieked into the silent telephone. The colonel watched him with an expression of deep scorn.

"Stop gibbering!" said the colonel finally. "That wire is dead, you can't bring it back to life! What's the matter?"

"They're dropping a barrage in front of our trenches!" cried Major Vincent.

"Haven't you a rocket that when fired means lengthen barrage or one that means C. P. O., General? Your C. P. O. general here ought to move the barrage away."

The major flew up the stairs again.

"Never thought of that, did you, Major?" called the colonel after him. "That's a good example," continued the colonel, turning to the other officers. "We rack our brains and sit up nights thinking up remedies for every contingency that might arise, and then when the contingency arises the officers in the forward zone never think of the remedy, but always try to apply some invention of their own."

At the dugout entrance the major bumped into another officer, followed by a pop-eyed infantryman with a rifle.

"Don't you think we'd better fire a rocket to shift the barrage to Offensive Counter Preparation?" asked the officer. "I'm afraid our men are out there and can't get in."

"Fire it!" choked the major.

The rocket went sailing. The barrage continued.

"Fire another!" cried the major.

Then the barrage began to weaken, die down, a few final whoops and it was silent. There was a heart breaking pause, while the major hoped that they hadn't fired the wrong rocket. The officers could plainly hear the machine gun going, and the shouts of the officers trying to get the American patrols under way. The officers with the patrols knew the barrage had stopped for some mysterious reason and they feared it might start again any minute.

IN NO MAN'S LAND the American officers raged at their men.

"Come on!" they cried, "drop everything! Let's go while the going is good!"

Some of the foremost Germans had already reached the patrols, and there was some lively hand-to-hand fighting going on. Some of the Americans obeyed their officers and ran toward their own trenches; others prodded at the Germans with their bayonets, and still others ran to help the prodders.

Lieutenant Colville ran up to the twisting mass of men, seized the first man he saw by the collar and hurled him bodily toward the American lines. The next one he smote under the ear, and then shoved after the first man. The officer just ducked in time to escape a rifle butt that shot out of the darkness. There was the hiss of a bayonet going into some one, then the grunting of its owner drawing to pull it out again, and that phase of the fight was over. The light machine gun suddenly ceased firing.

"*Yaaaah!*" snarled a man, "here they come! Hot dog, lookut the army!"

"Beat it!" cried the officer. "Come on, we can't fight the whole German army!"

The officer could see the enemy advancing in a line like a great black breaker rolling up on a beach. His throat puckered, and his chest became suddenly tight. Lieutenant Colville was a young man and did not want to die. However, if he must, better go down fighting than running.

"Every one run for the trench!" he called in a voice that sounded like some one's else. "I'll hold 'em up for a while!"

"Come on," said a voice behind him, "you an' me are just cowards, so let's be showin' the flat of our foot to the inimy. Glory to the brave, but myself for a deep dugout!"

"But Palmer's out there yet! We can't go in an' leave him!"

"Sure he's dead as boiled salmon. If the boche had not got in the way, that gun would have made rice out of him!"

"You men go in!" cried the officer turning. "You can't carry any one in front of this mob."

"We can't be leavin' a good lad to the Huns to try out for the little fat he's got in him," said Push. "Come on, Dope!"

Three grenades burst together. *Wheeee!* went the fragments.

"*Hoch!*" cried the Germans.

Then, having relaid their guns, the American artillery began to fire again, an offensive counter preparation, as it is called, on the German front line. The guns having been laid in haste, many of the shells fell short. The barrage landed in No Man's Land with the effect and sound of a dump cart depositing a load of bricks. All lay down at once. After a minute or two the Americans, finding themselves still alive, began to creep and crawl toward their own trench.

Lieutenant Colville came to the American wire, went up the lane and then paused a second or two before going over the parapet. There were a lot of men in the wire, stretcher bearers, kneeling riflemen, machine gunners, and two or three with slung rifles, who reached out to help the officer over the parapet.

"Let me alone," said he, "I'm all right." He wished he had stayed out in No Man's Land. He had been in command of this affair, the senior officer, and the whole thing had ended in disaster. To —— with that part of it and what the colonel would do to him, but how about the men that had been killed? Had it been his fault or not? He climbed over the parapet.

"Here's Lieutenant Colville!" cried some one. "Here's the boy! By —— I'm glad to see you!" The lieutenant discovered that Major Vincent was wringing his hand and that he was in the center of a very interested crowd. "Go right into the dugout," directed the major, "they're serving coffee and sandwiches in there. There's a little stuff we've borrowed from the French, too. Go right down!"

"How many men are missing?" asked the lieutenant, pushing aside the hands that grasped at him.

"Only three," said the major. "They're all back but three. Never mind, we'll look out for them!"

"Only three!" cried the lieutenant, "only three after all that shooting and hand-to-hand fighting!"

It had been dark, and a machine gun that has not been laid during daylight is not easily fired with accuracy after dark. Still, if there were three men missing, an officer had no business hunting himself a hole.

Lieutenant Colville turned to climb out of the trench again, but he was seized by fifty hands. There were too many men there eager to lay restraining hands upon an officer. He struggled, but without avail. There was a loud roar of voices from the other side of the parapet.

"Here they are!" cried some one, "here's the three!"

There was another thunderous cheer. Down the steps stumbled Push Dugan and Dopey McKnight, bearing between them the body of Palmer.

"Faith we couldn't leave him for the boche to send to the ovens," said Dugan.

"Is he dead?" cried several medical corps men, shoving forward.

"Yeh, he's dead!" said Dopey sadly. "We got scared an' stood up to run an' they seen us an' threw a ton o' bullets into him."

"Here's a stretcher," said some one, "put him down on the stretcher."

THE stretcher was spread in a nook of the trench, the shapeless huddle that had been Palmer was laid on it, and some one covered him with a blanket. An army blanket was not long enough to cover both face and feet, so a man's feet always stuck out of the bottom, hobnailed toes to the sky, to show all who cared to look that he had died with his boots on.

"Now let's go into the dugout!" said the Major. They all went down and, having been given sandwiches and coffee, stood around, packed a little tightly, while the officers rendered their report.

Lieutenant Colville spoke first, telling how the trench had been entered, how they had proceeded to clear it, and how the American fire on the Germans' second line had suddenly ceased. There was a slight interruption, some noise in a corner of the dugout and men muttering. The lieutenant stopped talking, and the major spoke sharply.

"Be quiet, you men, what's the matter with you?"

The lieutenant continued, telling how the patrols had retreated, how the barrage had started again, how the boche had come out and tried to capture the patrols and how the American artillery had come to the rescue in just the nick of time.

"Where are your prisoners?" asked the colonel.

In the pause that followed some men could be heard sipping coffee, but those that chewed upon sandwiches made of bully beef and leather bread ceased, for they made too much noise. The silence became embarrassing.

"Well, sir," said Lieutenant Colville, "we haven't got any."

The colonel did not grunt, he did not snort, he gave none of the signs of impatience authorized for his rank. His mouth, however, began to look like a knife wound and the lines from nostril to lip corner began to deepen. A flame kindled behind those cold gray eyes.

"Why not?" The words cracked like a whip.

"Sir, when we entered the trench we didn't see a living German and all the dugouts had been blown into splinters."

This was true, for the lieutenant had not seen any live Germans until after he was in No Man's Land on the way home.

"By ——, that's strange," muttered Major Vincent, "I could swear I saw a prisoner come over the parapet with the first men."

There was another stir in the corner and much whispering.

"There he goes, the ——!" cried some one excitedly. The crowd opened and some of the men, seeing that all was lost, reached out their hands and seized something. Then they dragged into the center of the dugout a small, gray-clad figure, who now wore instead of his helmet, a little gray cap with a red band. It was a German, a child of fifteen or so, with a thin white neck and a blouse with an overlarge collar. The German smiled upon them all.

"*Kamerade*," said he softly.

The men in the dugout, officers and all, looked like thieves caught in the act.

The colonel said nothing. He tipped back in his chair and looked long and scornfully at the prisoner. Finally he spoke.

"Well," said the colonel, "he isn't much, but I'll stick to my word. Who captured him?"

Each man looked at his neighbor and then at the floor. Many regretted they had not sunk a bayonet in that German when they had the chance. Lieutenant Trotter spoke.

"He was captured," said he, "by the man that was killed, some one from Lieutenant Glynn's patrol."

A pause, and then a murmur from some of the men. It might have been a murmur of corroboration, but it was not. It was the men of H company marvelling at the wondrous ingenuity of their officer.

"And so this is what we get," said the colonel in a voice that would sour milk, "after spending weeks in preparation, a million dollars or more in shells for a bombardment. After the work of twenty thousand men, labor troops to load ammunition on the train, labor troops to unload it, truck drivers to bring it up, artillery, sixteen batteries, two hundred men to a battery to fire it, after the entire sector under arms to repel a possible counter attack. We have this! Well, gentlemen, let's go home. Take these men out of my sight!"

The men turned and went up the stairs out of the dugout.

"How did that —— Jerry get loose in here?" asked Dopey, as he and Push shoved their way out.

"He come in with the rest of them in the dark and we found him in the dugout when we was havin' the bit drapee of java. So they shoved him under a bunk and the first thing ye knew, the men that was to watch him, they were gawkin' at the colonel, and he was loose again. Ye know the rest. Hark to the howlin' o' them wild shells. It's myself is the glad man I ain't out there now."

THE two armies hammered the neutral zone with right good will on the bare chance that there might be some members of the other side out there. Dopey and Push Dugan went along the trench to the stretcher where Palmer lay. The troops going out would have to pass by here and the two wanted to say farewell to their former comrade.

"Lookut his feet!" cried Dugan suddenly. "They do have moved! They was pointin' up and now they're turned over!"

"Some one's been friskin' him," said the more practical Dopey. "Cheese it, duck! Here comes the colonel!"

The two melted into the shadows, behind the stretcher. The colonel and his companion officers, division intelligence, two interpreters, and a man from G. H. Q., who had all been present to question the expected horde of prisoners, came to a halt and removed their helmets.

"Thirty men go out on a raid," said the colonel looking down at the corpse, "but they take no prisoners and all come home safely, all except this one poor lad! He was a brave man. He is the one that took the prisoner, you say?"

"It's a —— lie!" said a voice from under the blanket. "You can't make me be dog-robber to no old bag o' guts like him!"

Silence. The colonel put his helmet on with a loud clank. "Take his name," said he, "and have him tried for that remark when he comes back from hospital."

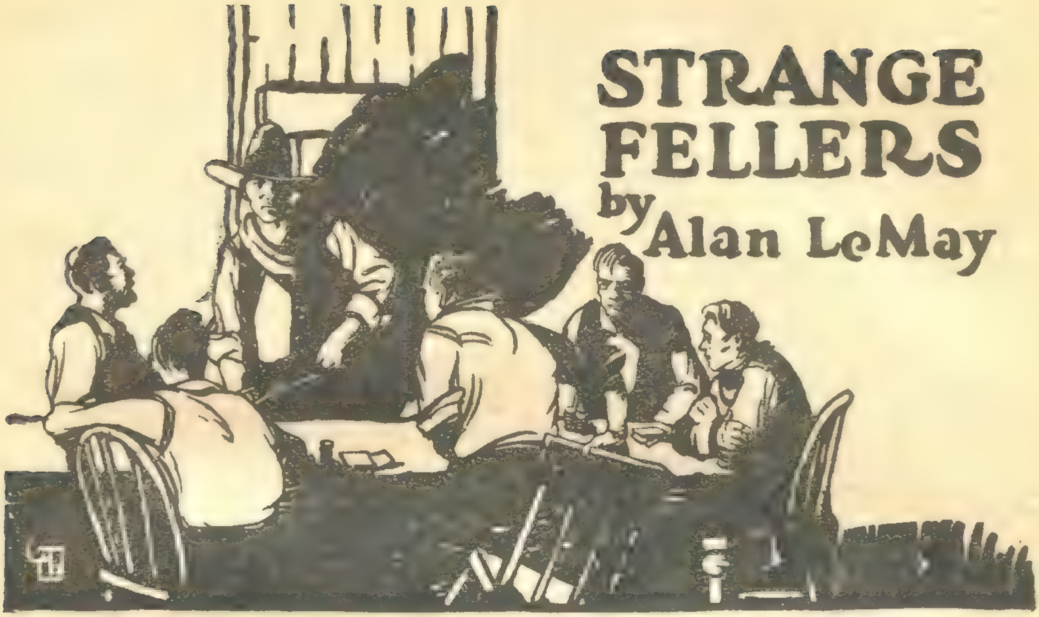
When the last officer had gone, two delighted soldiers pawed at the body. "Are yuh alive, no kiddin'?" they cried.

"Sure I'm alive, what the —— d'yuh think?"

At this moment a medical corps man arrived with a doctor that he had summoned, and they proceeded to examine Palmer's hurts.

"Oh man!" cried Dopey, "what the—— did you go sound off to the colonel for? He couldn't make you his orderly. You're as full of holes as a pair of salvage pants."

"Huh!" said Palmer, "well, I wasn't takin' no chances."



STRANGE FELLERS

by Alan LeMay

Author of "Whack-Ear's Pup," "The Legacy Mule," etc.

HE WAS a wanderer in all kinds of cow countries, a drifter, a floater, homeless yet always at home. In his twenty-six years he had ridden on both sides of the divide for many owners and in many states. He knew the ways of Texas, of Wyoming, of Idaho, and Montana. But especially he knew the ways of horses and of men. His name was Dan Torkaway.

As long as a horse and the vast open and scattering pay was his, he wasn't troubled to know what it was that was always calling him elsewhere, forever leading him on. Latterly, as it happened, there was also something driving him from behind. And so, working here and loafing there, he arrived at the clustered log buildings of the Triangle R, as many a cowboy has from time to time in the past.

The boss and chief owner of the Triangle R, tall and rocky of jaw, with keen gray eyes that squinted between muscled cheek bones and grizzled brows, was sitting on a box, watching a pair of fence-building Mexicans work. He turned as Dan Torkaway approached and appraised him with a casual survey.

He saw a sandy-haired cowboy of middling size, with a lean, smooth face beneath a traveled hat. A slender scar ran down the right side of his face, paralleling the smile lines that carved the leathery cheeks. There was nothing conspicuous about the rider's overalls, faded blue neckerchief and weathered gray shirt. The chaps were a little more striking, being of bald leather, each studded with silver *conchas* along the edge of the flare. He rode an ordinary bay gelding with the hill-pony's whiskered jaw; just another cold blood, such as most.

But the horse that Torkaway led held Rutherford's eye longer than the man. This second horse was a black, as magnificent a stallion as Rutherford had ever seen; a tall, clean-limbed animal with compact hooves that placed themselves accurately and spurned the ground with brisk, springy steps. The neck was conspicuously arched for the western country, where most horses carry their heads level, saving their energy to travel far, and the big eyes were curiously light, like pale agates, with a ready tendency to show the whites.

"Mister," said Torkaway dismounting, "maybe you can tell me who's the bull with the brass collar around here. Rutherford? Is that the handle?"

"Talkin'," said the Triangle R's Old Man.

"Name's Torkaway," said Dan. "Take in ridin' to do. Lookin' for some."

"Torkaway," Rutherford reflected, getting up. "Seems like I heard of another waddie name o' that some place."

"Got as much right to it as he has, I reckon."

"I s'pose. About the ridin', I dunno. Too bad yuh weren't here for the fall drive. I ain't exactly organized for the winter yet. S'pose yuh stick around for a couple o' days, an' we'll see what works out."

"I'll sure do that," said Torkaway, "an' much obliged."

"Good lookin' horse, there."

"Yeah, he's— Look out!"

The warning would have been too late. The black whirled like a coiling rattler. At the same instant Rutherford took three long, almost unhurried steps backward out of range of the ready heels. Realizing that his move had failed, the great black gracefully spun about again to face the men and stood waiting.

"Liable to do such," Torkaway said gravely. "Thought I noticed him takin' your range."

"I allow that horse has caused bother from time to time," Rutherford suggested.

"Yeah?" drawled Torkaway. Rutherford now noticed that Torkaway's green eyes were peculiarly shallow and cold, as if just back of them stood weathered limestone walls. Then, after a moment, "Yeah," said Torkaway more amiably.

"How'll yuh trade?"

"No," said Torkaway.

"Well, haze 'em into the corral. The cook's name's Joe. He'll hand yuh out somethin' if handled right."

Dan Torkaway grinned.

"Thanks."

Rutherford's eyes followed the man until he disappeared around the corner of a log building; then the Old Man turned away and strolled toward the bunkhouse. Something was troubling him in the back of his mind, lurking in shadows that his memory could not quite pierce.

"Torkaway," he muttered. "Torkaway. Now where the —— did I hear that name before?"

Within the bunkhouse "Squirty" Wallace, wiry little top hand, was lining his bunk with old newspapers. "Whack-ear" Banks, the shaggy-headed giant of a straw-boss, sat on his own bunk opposite, smoking a hand-made cigaret and offering advice.

"Friend Squirty, he figures it's just about the dead o' winter," he told Rutherford as the latter stepped inside. " 'Whiskers,' he left a old calender around an' Squirty found it. 'January,' says the calender. So right away Squirty knows he's most freezin' to death. But he ain't one to ask fer a extry blanket, not Squirty. No such dude frills fer him. Give him plenty o' newspapers, says he, an' he guesses he'll make out."

"I got my eddication," said Squirty, standing up squarely on his bowed legs to twirl a cigaret into being, "by spending my nights over literchure, an' there ain't a newspaper in the country that ain't found my infloonce to be pressin'. Also, I ain't like one feller I know that puts everything off to the last second. Course, some can't learn, but long experience has showed me that it sure gets cold in the winter. I know one feller," he went on, turning back to his task, "that always is plumb surprized to find winter come around again, same as last year. Come a hard freeze, an' he crawls out of his bunk pretty near froze stiff. He guesses he's got rheumatiz. He guesses he won't be able to ride much today. He wisht he'd known he'd need a overcoat this year. Why didn't somebody tell him it was goin' to be a cold Christmas?"

"If you old ladies will leave me get a word in edgeways," said Old Man Rutherford, "I started to let out that there's a new feller rode in. I ain't exactly took him on yet. Might. See'f any o' you boys know him, an' if there's somethin' spooky about him, leave me know. Dan Torkaway's the name."

"Dan which?" said Squirty.

"Torkaway. He has a horse."

"Ain't that nice," said Whack-ear who could get funny with the Old Man. "Not a real live one? Now, who'd 'a' thought—"

"This is a real horse," said Rutherford thoughtfully. "Mebbe you should take a look at him jest to see what a good one is like."

"Guess the Old Man's gettin' particular about who he has us associate with," commented Whack-ear when Rutherford had gone. "Did you ever hear tell o' the like?"

"That new hand sure must be a mean lookin' *hombre*," agreed Squirty.

He spread out more paper, then suddenly paused over a yellowed, tattered old sheet.

"Found a pitcher?" asked Whack-ear.

"Just lookin' at the weather report," said Squirty, running a hand through his rusty hair. "What was this stranger's name, now?"

"Dan Torkaway," said Whack-ear, "as I heard it."

Squirty Wallace casually folded up the yellowed old newspaper and stuck it in a back pocket.

"Never heard of him," he remarked.

"I thought yuh better save out somethin' to read," said Whack-ear. "You're right in savin' the oldest one, too. It's liable to wear out on yuh. Yuh can get the late news out o' them others some other year, after they're more seasoned, like."

"Whack-ear," said Squirty with gloating malice, "there'll come a time when you'll jest beg me with tears in your eyes bigger'n cartridges to leave you see this news item I got here!"

"What is it?" demanded Whack-ear with sudden curiosity.

"You go to ——!"

A LIMPID twilight settled like a magic spell of peace upon Wyoming. The light of day slowly dissolved, seeping away over the edge of the world in a glory of silver, purple and red-gold of such beauty as to hurt the hearts of men. There was the great silence of vast spaces, a silence that was somehow as clear as the voice of a silver bell. Very small in the vastness of mountains and plains, the log buildings of the Triangle R nestled among their cottonwoods, touched with the crimson of the setting sun.

On the bench before the bunkhouse five punchers lounged in attitudes of rest, smoking in silence for the most part, their eyes on the far away. The blue smoke rose in slender, smooth threads from the glowing coals of their cigarets.

Dan Torkaway silently went into the bunkhouse and came out with a small banjo, produced somehow from the complicated folds of his bed. He tuned it softly, and presently began to sing in a mournful tenor voice to the accompaniment of minor chords. The words of the song went something like this:

"Oh, I ain't gonna ride no more, never,
I ain't gonna ride no more;
Yuh can't find flapjacks in a sandstone ledge;
Cows are all right, but they don't lay eggs;
It's hellish hard walkin' when you've broke yore legs—
I ain't gonna ride no more."

"Now that's what I call a real philosophical piece," commented an ancient cowboy whose shiny baldness of head was in some part compensated by the enthusiasm of his brushy white beard.

It was "Whiskers" Beck, aged dean of the Triangle R's boys. "There's a lot of truth in that song. Leave me get my mouth organ, an' I'll jine in."

With Whiskers playing a syncopated tenor on his mouth organ, they went on:

"I got me a horse, name o' Woggle-Eye Jim,
He couldn't ride me, so I had to ride him;
I had another horse, name o' Pickle-Foot Bill,
He wouldn't leave me off him, so I'm ridin' him still.

"Oh, I ain't gonna ride no more, never,
I ain't gonna ride no more.
Never tie your horse to a prairie dog pup;
Yuh can't pull up a post hole, it splits all up;
Fallin' off's all right, but yuh stop so abrup'—
I ain't gonna ride no more."

"Now I swear," said Whiskers, "this here harmony's jest plain wasted on these roughnecks here. I move you we take our act up to the house, where it has some chance to be 'preciated. Madge likes music fine."

"Lead out," agreed Torkaway.

"I got a mouth organ, too," said Dixie Kane, the bronc peeler.

He smoothed down his hay-colored hair and tagged along.

Old Man Rutherford sat in a tilted chair on the porch of his little cottage, his boots on the rail. Madge, his nineteen-year-old daughter, sat beside him, her level gray eyes dreaming into the distance. She was wearing a starched red-and-white gingham dress in contrast to the overalls she wore during the day.

"We come to sing you a song," said Whiskers quaintly.

"Guess we can stand it," Rutherford grunted.

Whereupon the three sat down on the porch step. For a moment Dan Torkaway peered through the shadows at Madge, his fingers wandering idly over the strings. Then, after a little thought, he played a few chords and began to sing. Whiskers trailed in with the extra accompaniment.

"Long are the trails, honey, rough are the ways,
The rocky trails I've rode since the old, old days;
Many are the spots where my camp fire's shone,
Gleaming in the quiet of the All Alone.
Still my dreams take me back to long ago,
When first I went ridin' out of old Alamo."

"Where was you, Dixie?" Whiskers asked.

"I just got this, an' I ain't quite learned to play it yet," the bronc peeler admitted.

"But didja hear the way I come out on that last note?"

"Chorus!" Whiskers announced, getting his mustache over the mouth organ again. Dan went on:

"I can't think o' nothin' but your eyes so gray,
Shinin' like the east at the break of the day;
All I remember is your pretty brown hair,
Softer than the mist in the starlight there;
All my thoughs are in the long ago,
When I went ridin', ridin' hard, ridin',
Ridin' out of old Alamo."

"Last night I heard that ditty," said Dixie, "seems t' me like it spoke of 'your eyes so blue,' to rhyme with 'flowers in the dew.' It also said, 'purty yaller hair, shinin' like gold in the star—' "

"Aw shut up," said Whiskers.

"Mebbe you should sing, an' me play the mouth organ," Dan suggested.

"Oh, no," said Dixie hastily. "You're doin' fine. I didn't say nothin.' "

DOWN by the bunkhouse Squirty Wallace moved restlessly and went to squat on his heels beside Whack-ear.

"Ain't he never goin' to quit singin'?" Squirty growled.

"Why, the boy ain't only jest begun," replied the big straw boss. "You jealous, Squirty? I think it's real purty."

"Humph," said Squirty, and lapsed into silence.

"I've seen this ranny before," said Whack-ear presently. "He was in the act o' bein' shot at."

Squirty turned his slow, steady brown eyes on Whack-ear and waited inquiringly.

"I was crossin' the street towards Jake's place in Tonca," Whack-ear went on. "Torkaway rode up jest then on that big black man-eater he's got here, an' I stopped right there in my tracks to look at that horse. Just as Torkaway fixes to climb down, the livin', spittin' image of hisself comes out o' Jake's Place."

"The spittin' image of who?"

"The spittin' image o' Torkaway. Listen, will yuh?"

"Yuh mean, the two fellers looked alike?"

"Squirty, I think you're beginning to get the idee. Well, for a minute they freezes there, starin', same as if each one had met hisself an' couldn't figure it out. Then the feller on the ground grabs out his iron, an' throws down on Torkaway. *Bam-bam!* An' friend Whack-ear Banks sure plasters hisself flat in the dust, me bein' somewhat in a general line with the on-friendliness."

"Never mind about you. What'd Torkaway do?"

"He slaps the steel into the big black, an' the black purty near jumps clean out from under him. I never see man an' horse leave any place quicker."

"Didn't he fight back any?"

"Oh, he tried a shot or two on the run—from a good ways off. An' mister! The closest thing those shots came to—was me."

"Well, then what?"

Whack-ear looked pained.

"Why, that's all. Whatsamatter? Ain't that a good story?"

In the pause that followed, Torkaway's song came to them across the intervening space, a dolorous song with Spanish words—

"Que es la vida, un frenesi—"

Beneath the lamenting voice the banjo pulsated a song of sorrow of its own in minor keys.

"What's he singin' at her?" demanded Whack-ear suspiciously.

"Jealous, huh?" taunted Squirty in his turn. "He 'lows as how life is a hunk o' cheese, s'far as he's concerned. That's all. Never mind that. You mind that newspaper I saved this afternoon? Piece in it about the Torkaway boys."

Whack-ear sat up.

"Three years old," Squirty went on, "but news yet. Did yuh ever hear tell of a horse called Iron Paws?"

Suddenly Whack-ear snapped his fingers.

"I got it now. That's where that name Torkaway come in. Killer named Iron Paws got Old Man Torkaway down Arizona way. Three-day mystery about it because Old Man Torkaway's horse went home to another ranch with blood on the saddle an' somebody found a bloody glove with black horse hair caught in the buckle, Torkaway's horse bein's a sorrel."

"I didn't know that part."

"Turned out that Old Man Torkaway had been killed by this Iron Paws right in sight of one of his sons. An' they jest buried him without any remarks until folks got round to askin' questions. Where'pon the boys answered the questions, an' that was all."

"Not quite all," said Squirty. "There

was somethin' funny about it. Such that the coroner pretty near had Old Man Torkaway dug up to take a looksee himself."

"What kind o' funny?"

"I dunno. The paper jest said that the notion to dig up Old Man Torkaway had been called off owin' to the feelin's o' both boys. An' Iron Paws was shot by Daniel Torkaway, Ole Man Torkaway's younger boy."

They fell silent, and heard the end of Dan Torkaway's song—

"*Todos los hombres sueños son.*"

An off-key squawk from a mouth organ trailed into the night after the banjo had died away. They heard Dixie's, "'Scuse me. I dunno how I done that," and Madge's laugh, a satisfying laugh, somehow suggesting the rich, full flavor of home-made bread.

"Squirty," said Whack-ear softly, "it was Dan Torkaway's own brother that pulled down on him down Tonca way, surer than all ——." Suddenly he growled thickly, getting to his feet. "That —— has got no right to be singin' to Madge!"

"Wait!" urged Squirty, gripping the big man's arm. "What yuh goin' to do?"

"Try to get 'em away from there. Hey, Whiskers!"

"Yo!" came from the porch of Old Man Rutherford's cottage.

"Tenspot's worked his way out o' the corral!" bellowed Whack-ear.

A pause, then Whiskers' voice from the porch—

"You tell that fool hoss I said to go right back in!"

Whack-ear's neck thickened.

"I'm goin' up an' pull that Torkaway killer off o' there by his neck!" he growled.

Squirty Wallace planted himself before the big man in a way that endowed him with an air of unlimited authority.

"Now wait," he insisted, gripping Whack-ear's arms. "Let's us go off an' talk this thing over, you an' me."

And Whack-ear suffered the bow-legged little top hand to lead him away.

Leaning against the heavy poles of the main corral, Whack-ear cooled off somewhat and rolled a careful cigaret.

"You know what?" he said wonderingly. "That Torkaway killed his own pa."

Squirty considered.

"How d'yuh figure?"

Whack-ear's eyes stared narrowly at nothing while his big fingers rolled the cigaret between them.

"Look. Old Man Torkaway gets hisself killed. His boys bury him quiet, givin' out that Dan Torkaway seen him killed by a outlaw horse. All we know is that the signs showed that a black horse was at hand right then, there bein' black horse hair caught in the buckle of Old Man Torkaway's glove. But the coroner, he knew somethin' else. Somethin' downright suspicious lookin', because no one wants to go pokin' into graves without they got a fine large reason. Somehow the boys gets that investigatin' called off.

"All right. About a year after that I see both boys in Tonca. Now look. Those boys heired a ranch to take care of. Must be some reason for their bein' so far from home. If Dan Torkaway was runnin' an' if the other Torkaway was after him, that would get 'em away from home consider'ble, wouldn't it?

"Look. They waited a minute before shootin'. That shows they was surprized, both mebbe thinkin' Dan had made tracks a little faster than he had. But the other Torkaway wasn't too surprized not to have a smoke-wagon all cocked an' primed an' ready to his hand, though that ain't by no means the style, even in Tonca, not any more.

"One more thing I forgot to say. Dan Torkaway's brother took out after him that time, soon's he could get to his horse. Dan's horse is black, Squirty, real black."

Whack-ear drew a long breath, exhausted.

"Mebbe some other reason—" began Squirty.

"What kind o' reasons does a feller have to have to go gunnin' after his own brother year in, year out, while a ranch goes to work an runs down on him?"

"Let's don't go jumpin' in the dark, Whack-ear."

"Ain't any law case there, Squirty. But a fox sees more with his nose than you an' me read in the paper. All I says is—this feller ain't the kind of a feller I want singin' songs to Madge. An' any man with the blood of his pa on his hands an' his own brother gunnin' on his trail, he can't come in here an'—"

"*Shush!* Listen," commanded Squirty.

A man was walking toward the gate of the corral, whistling as he came. The dim starlight showed them a saddle on his hip.

The two men against the fence by the gate fell silent, more because they had nothing public to talk about than because they wished to remain unobserved.

Thus, standing there in the shadows, they saw Dan Torkaway rope the big black, saddle, bridle over the hackamore and tie the horse just outside the corral. After Torkaway had completed these operations Squirty Wallace spoke, his voice pleasant and casual.

"Goin' someplace?"

Dan Torkaway's unstartled acceptance of the question bespoke his previous knowledge that they were there.

"Nope," he answered genially. "Just saddlin' my night horse. Kind o' like to keep him handy."

The two looked at each other in the dark.

He strolled beside them as they sauntered back toward the bunkhouse. Presently he spoke, volunteering speech for almost the first time since he had arrived at the Triangle R.

"Nice place here," he said. "I ain't never been much of a hand to settle in one place. Always hankered to ride on. But I think I'd sort o' like to settle here for a while. If I was let."

They offered no answer to that.

"I AIN'T right sure," said Whiskers the following evening, "that I done such a foxy thing when I started this Torkaway to singin' to Madge. Seemed to me like those hard-fried eyes o' his had a kind o' watery look when driftin' in her direction."

Whack-ear slowly swung his shaggy head to look behind him. No one was near.

"You jest played plain ——, that's all you did!"

"Well, now," Whiskers rallied, seeing occasion for defense, "when I say he looked sloppy-eyed, I don't mean it in no onfittin' sense. He jest has a kind o' sad an' wishful look, that boy. But he's a good clean lad, Whack-ear. He can ride some an' keep his mouth shut purty fair. An' if he keeps a hoss ready an' saddled all night, I reckon we ain't much accustomed to makin' inquiries as to—"

"She saddled up an' was for ridin' out with him this mornin'. An' I don't like it."

"But he didn't let her."

"That's somethin'. Shut up."

Squirty Wallace, "Dixie Kane," and Dan Torkaway were coming around the corner of the bunkhouse.

"I see by the paper," said Squirty, "that some feller has worked out a plan whereby there's to be a redisterbution o' wealth. It sure sounds good to me. I know positive that there's five fellers right here on this ranch that still has money, in spite o' them havin' been to town. It ain't fittin' or right. I recommends a game o' Dealer's Choice."

"There bein' only five of us back, I guess he means us," said Whack-ear. "Did yuh hear, Whiskers? The boy wants to make a conterbution to us!"

"I never was one to keep a young feller down," admitted Whiskers. "Mebbe we should lighten his pockets, Whack-ear, so's he can rise some."

"Leave me in out o' the cold," said Whack-ear, leading the way into the dark bunkhouse.

A cold whisk of air was sliding down from the west, reminding them that the belated warm spell was probably to end in a sudden burst of winter without further fooling.

"I smell snow!"

"See?" said Squirty, lighting a lamp. "Yesterday he figured it was summer. He wouldn't put paper in his bunk, not him. Long toward mornin' I'll hear a kind o' frosty little voice with icicles on it shiverin' in my ear:

" 'Squirty, I'm most froze! Squirty, leave me crawl intuh your bunk! Squirty, I'm like t'die! Squirty—' Every little while from then on you boys'll hear a loud *boomp!* That'll be nothin' but Whack-ear bein' moved out o' my bunk on to the floor again."

"Dixie," said Whack-ear, hauling a homemade deal table out into the middle, "see how fast a good man can get firewood into that stove."

"Who, me?" marveled the aggrieved bronc peeler. "I brung in the last wood, an' I think—"

"It wasn't by no means the last. We're gonna need wood all winter," the straw boss corrected. "An' you stop that thinkin' afore yuh bust somethin'. You hear?"

"I win the deal by common consent," said Whiskers, waiving formalities. "Who wants some o' my poker insurance? Fer a certain price I guarantees to cover the insured feller's losin's. See? By insurin' yourse'f with Mister Beck, yuh can't do nothin' but win. We're playin' jest the us'al six bit limit, ain't we? Who wants to feel safe?"

"How much does this here insurance cost?" Dan Torkaway wanted to know.

"Depends on the feller," said Whiskers.

"How much for me?" asked Whack-ear.

"Dollar 'n half, an I pay back everythin' yuh lose."

"You're on!"

"All right, Whack-ear. How 'bout you, Squirty? For five dollars I insures yuh against a eight dollar loss. Chance to make three dollars jest by sayin' the word."

"You go to ——!"

"I dunno about you, Torkaway," Whiskers continued, shuffling a crisp new deck. "Never seen yuh play. But fer four dollars I'll pay your losin's up to ten, seein's Squirty passed me up."

"Goshamighty," said Whack-ear. "You figure we all gonna win?"

"Dixie Kane's here," Whiskers reminded him.

"Reckon I'll take the usual chance," Dan Torkaway decided.

"How much for me?" asked Dixie, coming away from the stove.

"Ten dollars covers a ten dollar loss."

Dixie snorted.

"You peetrified old hay rack," he commented, "I'll jest shake yuh down for that, come a middlin' decent hand."

Chips rattled out across the boards and were assembled into neat stacks. Cards flicked spinning into five piles. Conversation subsided into sentences of one word each. Five faces became blanker than a rawhide chip. The general redistribution of wealth had begun.

For two hours the men played by the light of the overhead lamps, while the cool breeze *whoofed* lightly against the closed door, and the fire clicked and sniffled in the pot-bellied stove. Contrary to tradition, Whack-ear's pile dwindled to next to nothing and there stuck in a sulk, refusing alike to grow or give up the ghost. Squirty Wallace's elastic stack of chips rose and fell erratically. Prosperity swamped him with chips. A few hands later he had to buy more in order to play. Two big pots put him ahead of the game and two big mistakes reduced him to one white chip.

Likewise, contrary to tradition, Dixie Kane's pile steadily grew. The bronc peeler was in a run of luck that adapted itself perfectly to his unscientific but mystifying type of play. His three queens topped Whiskers' three jacks. His four aces beat Squirty's four kings. And with nothing in his hand but a king high, he bluffed Whack-ear's flush into the discard. Whiskers was somewhat behind the game and Dan Torkaway was forging slowly ahead, seldom losing except to the confusing projects of Dixie Kane.

Whack-ear, sitting with his back to the door, studied Dan Torkaway's face. Torkaway played with an air of abstraction, but without the peculiar blankness of countenance assumed by some of the other punchers. Watching him, Whack-ear noted irrelevantly that Torkaway's eyes were oddly deep and green—mild eyes that yet would be quick to see into the mind of a horse.

"Whiskers has the edge," said Squirty, as the ancient cowboy raked in a fair-sized pot from him. "My honest, open face done that. Mebbe I could get by with murder, too, if I had a bunch o' brush hung in front o' my pan like him."

"Seems like I hear a horse out by the corral," said Dixie.

"A horse out by the corral," mocked Whack-ear, dealing. "Now ain't that strange. Everybody in? Cards to gamblers."

"Guess I'll play these," said Dixie, passing the draw.

"One card," said Dan Torkaway, "will do me."

The others drew three each.

"Six bits," said Dixie.

"Up the limit," said Torkaway.

"Ow," said Whiskers. "Signs tell grandpa to fold up his tent."

He tossed away his cards.

"That knocks down my shingle," agreed Squirty, following Whiskers' example.

"Dealer out," said Whack-ear. "Guess it's between you an' Torkaway, Dixie."

"Up six bits," said Dixie Kane.

"Up again," was Torkaway's reply.

Back and forth they raised. The pot increased to nine dollars, then twelve. The chips gave out, and the limit was thrown off by common consent. Torkaway bet thirty dollars; Dixie was forced to put up his saddle in order to raise. Torkaway was hard pressed to call, but he dug out fifty dollars more, his watch, an extra forty-five, a silk shirt. He was about to throw in his knife and buckskin gloves when Dixie stopped him.

"That's enough, mister," said Dixie. "You've matched my saddle all right."

"Then I raise yuh my bay horse," said Torkaway promptly. "Mind yuh, I say the bay."

Until now Dixie had remained calm and repressed, but now his excitement boiled over.

"Good goshamighty!" he broke out. "What'll I raise at him?"

Whack-ear, teetering on his soap box seat, ran a huge hand through his shaggy hair and studied Dan Torkaway's face. He saw that same air of casual abstraction; in the eyes the same mild depths of green.

"How'll I raise him?" begged Dixie again, bobbing up and down on his seat. Dan Torkaway seemed to dream, his eyes resting sleepily on the door behind Whack-ear's head.

A CHILL draft swept down the back of Whack-ear's neck, and he knew the door had opened. He half moved to pivot on his box to kick the door shut, but the move checked itself, and Whack-ear sat staring at Dan Torkaway's changing face. He saw Torkaway's green eyes wake and bore like steel into something in the door at his back and, as he watched, gates closed behind those green eyes, so that they became peculiarly hard and shallow, as if backed by weathered limestone walls. The thin curved scar, like an erased smile line, partly faded out against the changing color of Torkaway's face.

Whack-ear turned and found, standing in the doorway, a man who looked peculiarly like Dan.

A pause, and then Whiskers' voice—

"Shut that door."

And the stranger kicked it shut without taking his eyes from Dan Torkaway's face.

"I'm raisin'," blurted Dixie Kane, "raisin' some way!" Dan Torkaway tossed away his cards in the gesture that admits defeat. They fell face up on the table. "My ——!" swore Dixie, "he had me beat!"

At this point even Dixie Kane became aware that another game was on than that of Dealer's Choice. A profound silence followed, in which they heard the wind and the soft explosion of an ember in the stove.

"Hod," said Dan Torkaway at last, and his voice trembled as he spoke, "I'm gonna hafta shoot you yet."

"Yuh look surprized like," said the man that looked like Dan. "Didn't yuh know I was comin'?"

"Yeah, I knew you'd come, Hod."

"Mebbe we should go outside."

"I reckon."

Slowly, as if with reluctance, Dan Torkaway rose from the deal table. The chips he left lay in a rambling, disorderly pile, like wreckage abandoned to the winds of chance. He walked to his bunk and drew from it a cartridge belt, from which swung a holstered forty-five. His steady fingers moved deliberately as he strapped it on.

"Now jest a minute," said Whiskers Beck. "I don't wanta seem like buttin' into private affairs, an' this sure embarrasses me more'n it does you. But we don't have shootin's at the Triangle R. Maybe we're kind o' funny about that. If some waddie wants to haul off an' bust somebody in the jaw in the excitement an' confusion of the moment, that's his lookout an' he takes his own risk. But a dee-liberate shootin' is somethin' else. We always take killin' rows to the Old Man, an' if he can't compermise it, why, the two boys is asked to take the fireworks somewheres else."

"Ain't a livin' man wouldn't say I had the right of it," said Hod after a moment. "I'm wilin' to put my case up to anybody."

Dan Torkaway hesitated longer.

"No one can settle this but jest us two, Hod. You know that," he said and paused. "Still an' all, if yuh want to make laughin' stock out o' yourself, it ain't nothin' to me. You're pushin' this business. I ain't."

"Laughin' stock? We'll see who's laughin' stock," replied Hod in an ominous drawl. "Where's this Old Man o' yours?"

"Step this way," said Whiskers. "You better come along too, Whack-ear."

Dan Torkaway went back to his bunk after a sheepskin jacket and his hat.

"Is't far?" Hod demanded.

"No," said Whiskers.

He led the way, Whack-ear at his side. Hod and Dan Torkaway followed at a little distance.

"Where'd yuh get that stuff?" Whack-ear demanded of Whiskers in a sidelong whisper. "I never heard o' no such rule around here. You talk like we lived in jest one contin'al revolution."

"I jest made it up out o' my head," Whiskers admitted. "If there's a murder lookin' for a place to happen, I don't figure to have it pick out here. Anyway, I like this Torkaway boy."

Left alone in the bunkhouse, Squirty Wallace and Dixie Kane stared at each other.

"I guess we ain't invited to this party," commented Squirty. "In fact, it's right plain that we ain't."

"He had me beat," marveled Dixie. "Beat easy. Say, what kind o' shindy we got here, anyhow?"

"Plenty," said Squirty. "I wouldn't sit in line with that windy if I was you. Glass don't stop bullets not very good. An' jest close the door, too, seein's you're up."

But outside, before Dixie had the door closed, they heard the sudden *chunk* of an impact, a strangling gasp for breath and Whiskers' startled oath. Then Whack-ear's voice, raised in a swift shout— "Squirty—Dixie, for ——'s sake bring a light!"

Dixie rushed out, and Squirty, pausing to snatch down a lantern, followed close on his heels. The windy night was darker than a wolf den, and the dim golden blur of the lantern was snuffed out by a fierce gust. They could see nothing.

"Here he is!" called Whiskers. "Gimme hand here!"

Dixie Kane, the youngest of them all, felt that swift sickening sensation that can come over a man when some one is hurt, perhaps killed, in the mystery of the dark. He now made out the figures of Whiskers and Whack-ear Banks, bending over a limp body on the ground. Hurrying forward, he helped them carry it into the bunkhouse.

"It's Dan!" exclaimed Dixie.

Whiskers shook his head.

"Nope. T'other one." They laid the man on the nearest bunk.

"Is he knifed or jest whanged on the nut with an iron?" asked Squirty.

"Jest cracked with a fist," said Whiskers. "Jaw ain't busted, either. Still works. He'll come out of it. Where's Dan?"

The wind slatted open the half-closed door, whisking cards from the table to the floor.

"Listen!" said Squirty, straightening up on his bowed legs.

The four stood in silence, looking at each other. Muffled, almost drowned in the voice of the wind, came the sound of running hoofs, a sound that diminished and died away.

The man that looked like Dan Torkaway stirred, twitched, and raised himself groggily upon one elbow. "Where is he?" he demanded thickly. "How'd I get in here?"

"He soaked yuh one," Whiskers volunteered. "You're comin' round all right, boy."

"Where is he?" demanded the stranger again.

"Gone," Whiskers told him. "Clumb on a hoss an' rode."

The prostrate man seemed to struggle to get this news through his head. Then suddenly he surged to his feet, and stood unsteadily.

"The —— coyote," he snarled. "Leave me find my horse!"

He started forward, swayed and caught hold of Whiskers' arm.

"Help me find my horse," he begged. "I gotta ride, mister. What'd I do with that horse?"

The others trouped after as Whiskers led him out.

SLOWLY but implacably the dim gray light of a cold and rimy dawn forced its way in through the smoky windows of the bunkhouse. It was a barren and unfriendly light, invading warm bunks to force a chill and unattractive reality into the place of pleasant dreams. At other seasons the punchers might have rolled out in darkness in order to get breakfast over with in time to start work by the first light of day. But at this season there was no particular rush, and the daylight itself broke its own bad news.

"Tarr'ble" Joe, the cook, had ridden in from Spring River at two in the morning, and he didn't feel very well. But he was dragged out of bed by his profession as inexorably as by a log chain. Heaving his bulging hulk out of his bunk, he pulled on boots and sobbed out the usual curses that were his morning ritual. Then he stumbled out in the direction of the mess shack.

Fifteen minutes later Squirty Wallace stirred uneasily and pulled his blankets over his head. A few minutes after that Whiskers Beck slowly pushed his shiny bald head out from under the covers, disentangled his beard from the blanket folds and looked around.

"Whack-ear! Hey, Whack-ear!" he called, and a low moan answered from the opposite bunk. "Time to get the boys out, Whack-ear!"

Whack-ear slowly sat up and lowered stockinged feet to the floor. Whereupon Whiskers pulled the covers over his head again and went back to sleep. He had seen his duty and he had done it; that let him out. If there was any subsequent trouble about getting Mr. Whiskers Beck up, that was Whack-ear's worry, not Whiskers!

One by one they rolled out, following Whack-ear's example—Squirty Wallace, Whiskers and Dixie Kane. An ace of spades, face up on the floor, reminded Dixie of his winnings of the night before.

"Wonder where Torkaway is now," he mused aloud.

At this a pile of blankets in a supposedly uninhabited bunk squirmed slightly and came to life. Four punchers stared a little blanky as a tousled head was thrust forth. It was Dan Torkaway.

The four Triangle R hands stared at each other as Torkaway piled himself out of his bunk and began to dress. Silently they pulled on overalls and boots; silently the five men filed out to the mess shack in response to Tarr'ble Joe's horn.

Breakfast was a quiet meal. Not one question was asked by word or facial expression, nor an explanation offered.

"Pass the taters," said Whiskers twice.

And that was the full extent of the conversation.

AFTER breakfast Whiskers found excuse to delay while Dixie, Squirty and Whack-ear proceeded to the corral to rope and saddle their ponies. As he had hoped, Dan Torkaway stopped him as he at last stepped out of the bunkhouse, his saddle on his hip.

"Whiskers," said Torkaway, "I'd like to talk to you some."

Whiskers Beck eased his saddle to the ground, and they stood together before the bunkhouse in the horizontal sunlight of the awakening day.

"I ain't stayin'," Torkaway went on, "I jest come back to get my war bag an bed. But you been real white to me, Whiskers, you sure have. An' if that brother o' mine comes round here with a pack o' lies, I want you should know the straight of it. So's if anybody in particular should ever ask, you can tell 'em the truth."

"Sure, I'll tell her," said Whiskers.

Torkaway looked surprized, and the slender scar darkened a bit. But he went on.

"Here's the straight of how come I'm ridin' free an' loose, with Hod campin' on my trail.

"You remember a horse named Iron Paws, that crippled the boy at the Twin Peaks rodeo, four years back?"

"Heard of him. Killer, he was," Whiskers said.

"Yep. Iron Paws belonged to me an' pa. Then he got away. Three years back me an' pa went horse huntin' an' found this Iron Paws keepin' together a herd of about twenty-five head. What with old Iron Paws punchin' 'em along behind an' a glass-eyed old pinto mare to lead, they was sure a spooky lot an' hard to catch. But we fooled 'em and headed 'em into a trap, a brush an' wire V with a corral at the point. Pa was hazin' 'em close, I was a little farther back. The herd went into the corral—all but Iron Paws.

"All of a sudden, as he sees he's tricked, Iron Paws goes wild. He turns an' comes chargin' back. 'Leave him go!' I yells. But Iron Paws goes straight for pa. Killed him in the saddle, he did, afore my eyes. Yuh see, pa's forty-five jammed. I tried to kill Iron Paws as he run past. I emptied my gun at him, Whiskers. But, Whiskers, the Torkaways jest ain't shots. He got away."

Torkaway paused, and rolled a cigaret. "Hod an' I rode out after that, aimin' to ride down Iron Paws, an' make him coyote meat. But we disagreed as to where he was, third day out. Hod had to look where he knew any reasonable horse would go. But I knew Iron Paws. I went where no reasonable horse would go. An' there he was."

Torkaway paused again, inhaled deeply and blew the smoke out through his nose.

"I killed Iron Paws, Whiskers."

The gray stone gates closed behind the green eyes, in a way that somehow made Torkaway's whole face a mask.

"I killed him. Yuh gotta take my word for that. Yuh gotta believe I killed him because I say so!"

"Ain't doubtin', am I," said Whiskers.

"Ridin' back was about six days' ride, by then. Right after killin' Iron Paws I got a big shock. Not more'n a mile away I come on somethin' so strange I could hardly believe my own eyes. There was another Iron Paws, jest a livin', spittin' image o' the first.

"Course, I thought right away Iron Paws

wasn't dead or I was crazy or somethin'. I took out after this horse. Pretty soon I see that this one's kind o' tame, like. Different from Iron Paws, thataway. I whistled at him, like I always whistle at a horse. Whiskers, he stopped!"

"Terlegaphy," said Whiskers Beck.

"What?"

"Nothin'. Go on."

"I got down, an' he let me walk near. I roped him. He led easy. He even let me look in his mouth. Iron Paws was nearly ten years old, Whiskers, though Hod may claim he was less. This horse I roped was only four. It was a different horse, Whiskers, though they looked so much alike, both black without marks, an' with them bluey glass eyes. An' when I went back to look, Iron Paws still lay dead.

"Next day my horse broke his leg in a badger hole. Rather than walk back, o' course, I took a chance on losin' my saddle an' broke this new horse. He sure fought. But bime-by I rode him in. Whiskers, there ain't but one explanation. This horse that I got here looks so much like Iron Paws, he sure must be Iron Paws' colt!"

"Seems likely," Whiskers agreed.

"But Hod wouldn't listen. He swore it was Iron Paws, an' thinks so yet."

"Didja let him look him in the mouth?" Whiskers asked.

The limestone walls were hard behind Torkaway's eyes.

"A man has got to take my word, when I give it," he said. "I wouldn't let him hog-tie my horse."

"Hog-tie?"

"Jest because I can put my hand in this horse's mouth don't mean anybody can," Torkaway explained, "not with the horse on his feet."

"Oh," said Whiskers, pulling at a white mustache.

"Hod was bound he was goin' to kill Iron Paws' colt. So I rode off in a spatterin' o' poor-aimed lead, leavin' my half o' the ranch we heired to him. But real obstinate, is Hod. I've kept ridin' an' Hod's kept follerin' on. Twice he's caught up—once in Tonca, once in Coulter's Pass. Both times he fired on the black horse at sight. I think a sight o' that black, Whiskers. Never was such a horse if handled right. An' not a speck o' bad in him no place. Whiskers, there ain't any bad in Iron Paws' colt, not when he's treated right.

"But Hod, he swears he'll never quit until my black horse is dead. Seems like when a man's own brother takes after him, Whiskers, there ain't nothin' will stop him, never."

"Yep, nobody comes unlicked any faster than a brother," Whiskers admitted.

"I jest wanted yuh to know it ain't my fault I got this bother, Whiskers," said Torkaway. The gates opened behind the green eyes so that they became deep and full of appeal. "I ain't dealt to no one off the bottom o' the deck, an' I wanted yuh to know I stand square in case any one should ask."

Abruptly Torkaway turned away and strode toward the corral. Whiskers did not proceed to saddle at once, but rolled himself a cigaret and sat down on the bench by the door to ponder the odd yarn that he had heard. Presently Torkaway reappeared, leading the big black, saddled.

"I gotta tie on my things," he said.

"I'll hold your hoss," Whiskers offered.

"I—I dunno but what he's better tied," Torkaway said. "Never was much to stand."

He tied the black at a near-by rail. Whiskers sat gazing at the stallion, marveling at the animal's muscled beauty. He, at least, could understand why a man might go riding on indefinitely, if it was for the sake of a horse like that.

Torkaway came out of the bunkhouse, and began strapping his bed roll to the saddle of the black.

"Kane's winnings are in his bunk," said he.

Whiskers nodded.

"Well," said Torkaway, "G'bye."

"So long," said Whiskers.

Through the cottonwoods and around the corner of the bunkhouse came a foaming gray horse at the dead gallop. His shoulders, black with sweat, flashed in the sun as he pulled up on his haunches. Lather like shaving soap dripped from under the saddle blanket.

Out of the gray's saddle dropped the man that looked like Dan.

The newcomer gave his brother hardly more than a glance. His eyes were on the tethered black, the horse that Dan Torkaway claimed was Iron Paws' colt. Deliberately he drew his gun, deliberately he aimed.

Torkaway flung himself through the air

at the man with the gun. They went down together, the gun discharging in the air. And when they came up, Dan Torkaway was in possession of his brother's gun.

"You ——," swore the other, "put down that iron and fight!"

"Hod," begged Dan, "for ——'s sake pull up. It ain't the horse, I tell yuh. It ain't Iron Paws, Hod!"

"Yore shieldin' the horse that killed pa," said Hod, his voice grating and low. "An' I'm goin' to kill that horse, the murderin' ——, even if I have t' kill you!"

"I swear to high Heaven, Hod, that horse ain't him!"

Only the vaguest suggestion of an obstinate uncertainty showed in Hod's face as he replied.

"Then you leave me look in his mouth!"

"No," said Dan. "I'd see you in —— first!"

"I got a right to look him in the mouth," persisted Hod, "an' I'm gonta!"

He stepped toward the black.

"Hod," said Dan, his voice like steel, "I'll shoot yuh down the second yuh touch that horse!"

"Then shoot, yuh ——!"

"I'm tellin' yuh," shouted Dan, raising the gun.

And Whiskers, stepping up behind him, snatched down his gun arm and held it with his full weight.

"For ——'s sake Hod!" yelled Dan. "Look out!"

Quietly Hod approached the horse, speaking gently. Slowly he raised a hand to grasp a silken black ear. His hand touched it.

Something exploded within the black hide at the touch of the man's hand. The stallion reared backward as if cut with a whip, squealing in a vicious rage. The hackamore snapped like paper. Wild-eyed, screaming, with ears flattened and mouth wide, the black plunged at the man, striking with driving forefeet. Hod dropped and rolled, and the horse went over. The crazy beast whirled as if in mid-air, sprang to trample with four hoofs at once.

Dan Torkaway wrenched his gun arm loose from Whiskers' relaxed grasp. As he fired the black came down in a heap, apparently on Hod's prostrate body. The black struggled to rise, got to his knees. Dan fired again, and the black head sank a little. Again—again.

"Good ——!" burst out Whiskers, clawing frantically for the place his own gun might have been. "He's jest cutting him to pieces any old way!"

The Torkaway boys were not good shots. The black rolled over on his side, trembled and was still.

Whack-ear Banks and Dixie Kane had sprinted up and were dragging Hod Torkaway from under the body of the black. Squirty Wallace came racing on his buckskin, dropped from the saddle without stopping the horse and sprang to help them. The three carried the battered man into the bunkhouse, where they laid him on the same bunk that had received him the night before.

Whiskers Beck, following them in, turned at the door to look at Dan Torkaway. Dan had sat down shakily on the bench by the door, his face an oyster gray, his hands dropped limp between his knees. His gun had fallen to the ground. He had eyes only for the red-stained carcase that had been his horse.

"YOU seem to be comin' round all right," said Whiskers presently to the man in the bunk. "Barrin' them fingers, yuh ain't much more'n shook up. Yuh don't seem lucky, boy. Seems like every time we see yuh we start carryin' yuh in!"

"Listen," said Hod Torkaway, and Whiskers noted again how much the man looked like Dan. "Is that —— killer dead?"

"Plenty," said Whiskers. "Plumb weighted down with lead."

Hod Torkaway seemed to breathe more easily.

"Listen. Dan won't talk to me. That boy's got an obstinate streak, some way. You got any influence with him?"

"Not much," said Whiskers. "But as much as anybody here, I reckon."

"Tell him if Iron Paws is dead, we're all square. Tell him I even admit that horse wasn't Iron Paws at all. I won't even look in his mouth to see, now he's dead. You tell Dan I want he should come back an' work our cattle with me, an' we'll say no more of it."

"He's fixin' to ride," said Whiskers, "but I'll go try."

Outside, Dan Torkaway had transferred the savings of a lifetime, consisting of saddle, bed roll and war bag to the back of the horse with the whiskered jaw.

"Dixie wouldn't take the bay," he told Whiskers ruefully. "He said he hadn't covered that bet, though he was goin' to raise. He was for callin' all bets off, seein' I had him beat when I dropped an' us not comin' to a showdown for special reasons, and so on. But I made him keep the rest of the stuff. Well, leastwise, I'm able to ride, Whiskers."

He forced a shadow of a smile.

"Hod was sayin' how he thought—"

"I know, Whiskers. Tell Hod I got nothin' against him. I'll ride around and see him some day, bimeby. Glad to know he ain't hurt. Don't want to talk to him now, though, Whiskers."

"You ain't goin' back to yore ranch in Arizona?"

"Reckon not, Whiskers. Aim to ride a while."

"There's some wouldn't mind seein' yuh stay right on here, Torkaway."

"I thought of that—stayin' here, I mean, if I was let. Had time to do a pile o' thinkin', ridin' out last night like I did. But somehow, one kind o' calls for the other—stayin' here an' goin' back, don't yuh see? An' the two don't hook up, neither." Whiskers didn't see, but he said nothing. "So I guess I'll jest keep on."

"Keep on what?"

"Ridin', Whiskers, ridin' on. Got the habit now I guess. Well, g'bye, Whiskers."

"Wait now, Torkaway. Yo're shook up like. Wait a while, an'—"

To Torkaway came the feeling that he had talked until he had made a fool of himself. He forced himself to grin apologetically, then touched his horse with a spur. The whiskered bay moved off at a fox-trot.

As Torkaway disappeared beyond the cottonwoods, Whiskers turned with sudden resolution to the carcase of the black horse.

"There's somethin' I gotta see," he said to himself.

He stooped by the motionless head and his hands took hold of the velvety nose and jaw in the position of a man about to open a horse's mouth. Then suddenly he stood up.

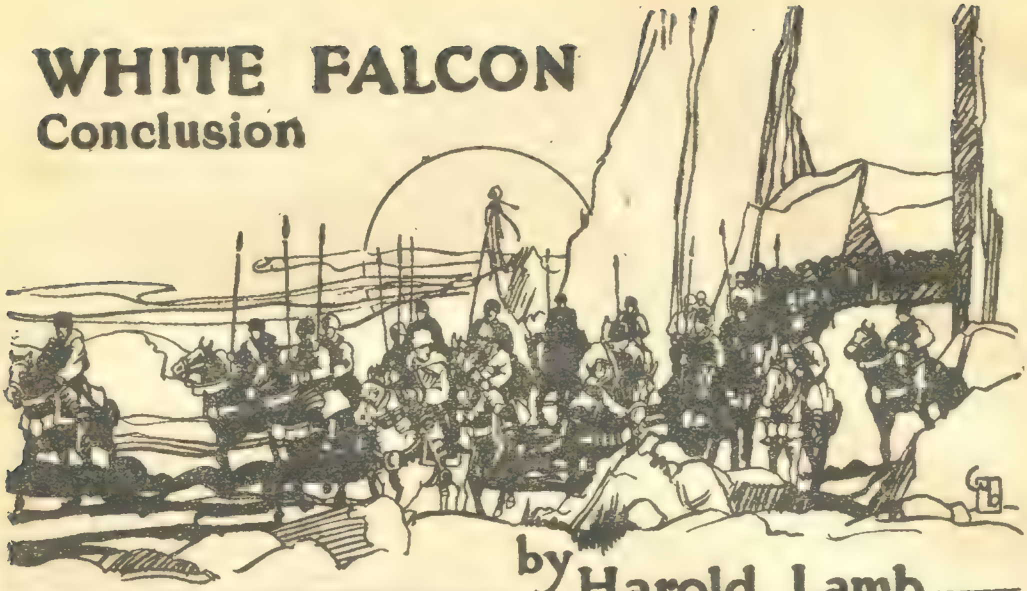
"Nope," said he. "Iron Paws or Iron Paws' colt, it ain't any business of mine. I ain't goin' to look-see. An' neither is anybody else without consider'bly squelchin' this committee o' one. I can be real obstinate, too, when I've a mind."

For a long moment he stared after Torkaway, now a tiny, receding figure on the valley trail. Whiskers scratched his head as he stared pondering several things.

"Strange fellers," said he at last, as he turned away. "Strange fellers, the both."

WHITE FALCON

Conclusion



by Harold Lamb

Author of "The Snow-Driver," "Bogatyr," etc.

The first part of the story briefly retold in story form

THROUGH the Gora gate at Moscow came three Cossacks: Ayub, a Zaporoghian, Khilt, an old man, who had once been leader, *Koshevoi ataman*, of all the Cossacks, and Kirdy, a very young warrior, the grandson of Khlit. They were looking for their brethren, five hundred *Donskoi*, Cossacks of the Don, who, they had heard, were quartered in Moscow with the troops of Boris Godunov, Tsar of the Muscovites.

But they found that their brothers had not taken service with the Muscovite, but had been captured by him in battle and were sentenced to be tortured to death. Running to the screening within which the *Donskoi* were imprisoned Ayub wept tears over the fate of his brother in arms Demid, the White Falcon, leader of the five hundred.

But Khlit, the old man, bribed his way into the presence of Boris the Tsar.

"Urgench is a far city on the Blue Sea in the land of the Turkomans," he said. "If you will set the *Donskoi* free they will bring you the rich treasure of the city. None else could do this thing."

And the Tsar was convinced, and freed the *Donskoi* on their oath that they would bring him the treasure. That night he asked Shamaki, his old Tatar magician, what the outcome of the venture would be.

"It will end in success," said the old man, "but there will be much bloodshed."

Yet the old man left the court and joined the Cossacks. Thus the Don men set forth, through wild waterless regions, leaving the Royal escort, a regiment under Van Elfsburg, at the Volga. Kirdy rode ahead as leader of the scouts.

ON THEY rode in the face of famine; across sluggish rivers, arid plains, the Blue Sea, until they saw no faces but those of Tatar, Mongol and Turkoman.

Then, when food and drink was nearly gone they came upon more fertile country and sighted the towers of Urgench.

Captured Turki traders swore that Arap Muhammad, Khan of Urgench was away with his army. So the Don men scaled the city walls at night and conquered the inhabitants.

Urgench was theirs.

They rushed up and down the streets of the city, fighting the few Mongol soldiers quartered therein; plundering the street stalls, drinking the Turkoman wine, singing songs on the steps of the temple of Allah. Demid killed one of the minor khans of Arap Muhammad's army in battle. Ivan, a squadron leader, *kuren ataman*, and a few of the brothers met their death in the city, but in the main all was well.

They found Nur-ed-Din, Light of the World, a beautiful slave of Arap Muhammad Khan. She was left alone with Kirdy, Witless, and Dog-Face.

"See this beautiful pigeon," she said.

And she let it fly away. Then the brothers realized that it was a carrier and was taking the message to the Khan of the fall of his city. This meant that the Turkoman leader would return within four days, when they had expected seven in which to prepare for his arrival.

All was in uproar. Soon the Khan would be marching up the river with his great army. The *Donskoi* did not dare remain. If they were to have the slightest hope of returning to Boris Godunov with the spoil of their raid they had to escape immediately. For Arap Muhammad Khan would surely kill them all. There was an end to drinking and revelry. Preparations for the road were made.

Kirdy, tired with battle and plundering, slept. He awoke to find that two days were past, and the *Donskoi* were ready for the march.

Also Khlit told him that a hawk had killed the carrier pigeon, but that they were taking the spoil from the city as soon as possible so that there would be no danger of a battle with the Khan.

Thus the *Kosaki* rode from Urgench, Ayub bearing the standard and a sack containing the treasure of the raided city; and as they rode they sang their war song:

"Shall we sit idle?
Follow death's dance!
Pick up your bridle,
Saddle and lance—
Brothers, advance!

Though the dark raider
Come to destroy
Death the invader
Rob us of joy
Nitchogo, stoi!"

CHAPTER XI

Where a city is, there are no wolves; where peace exists, no Turkomans are to be found.
—Proverb of the Trans-Caspia.

THE column of smoke that hung over Urgench became smaller and smaller. Twenty miles distant, it could still be seen. And the first night a red eye of fire glowed under the smoke, following the Don Cossacks in their flight northward over the gray breast of the dry lands. At noon they had halted, to sleep under their *svitkas* propped up on the lanes. When the sun grew red at the horizon's edge they resumed their march, changing saddles to the rangy Turkoman ponies, pushing these hardy beasts through the night.

At sunrise the column halted without a command being given, and every rider eased himself in the saddle to gaze attentively into the south.

Even the most experienced among them—they whose eyes were the keenest—could detect no sign of pursuit. Certain that the back trail was clear for ten miles at least, they looked to the north and the youngest warriors shouted in amazement.

By now they should have been close to a line of high bluffs. Demid had marked the position of this ridge in his mind as a possible refuge on the return journey and had headed toward the only pass that would admit wagons through the bluffs.

Nothing was to be seen of the heights. Instead, lines of black Turkoman tents took shape on the horizon. Among the tents were dark herds of horses, and here and there strings of laden camels could be seen moving—caravans bound across the desert.

The void of the plain had been peopled with a multitude, silent and threatening. Strangely enough, the men of this encampment did not look toward the Cossacks, nor did the caravans cease from aimless wandering among the black tents.

"Arap Muhammad Khan has camped in our path!" cried one of the Donskoi. "That is the Turkoman horde!"

Shading his eyes with his good hand—his broken arm was strapped to his side—Ayub the Zaporoghian shook his head.

"Nay, it is otherwise. When did Turkomans let laden camels pass, without taking their pick of the spoil? When did merchant caravans seek the black tents—or goats run into a tiger's lair? Yonder is witchcraft at work."

In fact, as the sun gained strength, the mirage faded, disclosing the purple buttes for which they had been looking. On their way to Urgench the Cossacks had seen more than once the domes and minarets of great cities lying near at hand—until the visions faded like this one. It was palpable magic, they thought—Moslem trickery, intended to lead them astray. But what was the meaning of the encampment of the black tents?

"'Tis an omen," hazarded the one who had first cried out, seeking to justify himself.

"Then the omen is a good one," retorted Ayub. "And why is that, sir brothers? First the way was barred to us, and peril, like an eagle, hovered over us. Now the way lies open—we have water in casks on the camels, and grain and good *kouniaki*, war ponies. Urgench was a rich city, and we have its treasure here in these six carts. May the —— clip the ears of him that says otherwise!"

The scalp-locked heads of the listening Cossacks nodded agreement, and word was passed from squadron to squadron that the magic encampment had been an omen, and a good one. Meanwhile—for Demid had called a halt to allow the men to eat a little and the horses to roll—the warriors crowded around the six carts and fell to speculating as to the value of the treasure. Some felt of the burlap rolls that contained fine silks and damasks, others told of the many gold cups, and chains and ornaments they had seen packed into the wolfskin sacks—no silver had been taken, owing to its greater weight.

Ayub pointed out a chest bound with tarred ropes and covered with horse cloths on the top of the leading wagon.

"This chest, sir brothers, is worth more than all the rest. Within it are the precious stones of Arap Muhammad Khan, the pearls and the emeralds and the green jadestone that the Cathayans covet."

"But, noble sirs," ventured Witless, who had been cogitating, "is the treasure enough? Will it buy back our lives from the Muscovite Tsar?"

"May the dogs bite you!" cried the young Cossack. "Can't you understand what is outside your own belt? The Tsar, Boris Godunov, swore to give us life if we brought him the treasure of Urgench. It is here, and if we give it to him he must keep his word."

"*Allah birdui*," murmured Witless, who was accustomed to be mocked whenever he spoke. "God gives! Only this was my thought, my brothers: If our father, Demid, had said 'I will set you free' that would be the end of the matter. If Khlit, who was *koshevoi* of the Cossacks, had made a promise, no one could doubt the promise would be kept. But this Muscovite prince is a horse of another hide. God alone knows whether he will keep an oath."

"That is well said, Witless!" cried Dog-Face, who was the brother-in-arms of the stupid Cossack. "Is not Boris Godunov a merchant? And is it not well known, sir brothers, that a merchant thinks only of profit and not of honor at all?"

"But he swore the oath before all the lords of Muscovy."

"Well, that is true. And yet, —— take him, he murdered a fledgling boy so that the path to his throne should be clear."

The warriors were troubled by these words and the hungriest ceased eating to turn to Makshim who had just come up from the rear. The hawk-faced squadron leader was ready of tongue and they looked to him to settle the question.

"*Hai*, it is clear enough," he said, throwing one leg over his saddle horn. "The Tsar will keep his oath if it pleases him, not otherwise. He is a prince, not a merchant. It suited him to give you weapons and send you against Arap Muhammad Khan. When he has the treasure in his hands he may change his mind about making the Donskoi brotherhood free men."

"Then what is the best path for us to follow?" asked Dog-Face, wrinkling his broken nose.

Makshim laughed.

"Why, you have weapons, horses, riches! Seize the land at the river Jaick where the desert ends—take Moslem women for wives—breed sons and train them to steal from the caravans. Then ye will be free men—not otherwise!"

Several grunted approval, but Ayub, who was in charge of the treasure, did not relish the mockery of the man who had been a noble before he joined the brotherhood of the Don.

"Nay, sir brothers," he put in, "this one chest is sufficient to ransom us. So Khlit said, and his wisdom is greater than Makshim's."

"Did the Wolf say that?"

"Aye, he swore that Boris Godunov would leap from his chair when he saw what is in this little chest. Khlit had the precious stones in his care, so he has been able to judge them."

The kettle-drums by the standard beat the summons to horse at this point, and the Cossacks about the treasure wagons scattered to their various *kurens*. But Kirdy went with Makshim and the advance of twenty lancers, and remained buried in thought until the detachment had entered the boulders of the narrow pass between the buttes.

"Is it true, Makshim," he asked, "that you would form a new tribe?"

"In the desert?" The handsome Cossack smiled. "Nay, the river Don is far, very far from my home. Once in Kief"—he broke off with a shrug of his broad shoulders. "Perhaps I am different, Kirdy, from the Donskoi; and you, too, are unlike them. But we will do one thing together. We will take the treasure to Moscow to the Tsar and in all the world it will be said our word is not smoke."

So he boasted, and Kirdy began to understand a little of this man's nature. Makshim had once been a leader of men, perhaps khan of a tribe—for Kirdy knew nothing of the Christian peoples or their lords, except what Khlit had told him which was very little. This vast steppe that stretched immeasurable distances to the east was his home.

"Rein in!" said the boy under his breath.

WHEN Makshim halted his charger, the detachment stopped, the experienced Cossacks becoming quiet on the instant. Kirdy dismounted and searched the bed of the ravine for tracks, without finding any. His glance ran along the heights, topped by a gray fringe of *tamarisk*. And he even crouched down to put his ear to the ground.

"What did you hear?" asked Makshim with some amusement, because the boy's face had grown bleak with sudden concentration.

"Nothing, *ataman*—but look at the birds!"

Glancing up at a flight of rooks at the gully's edge, Makshim shook his head carelessly.

"A hawk has stirred them up. *Rishïy marsh!*"

The Cossacks gathered up their reins and Kirdy heard something flick past his head. The *esaul* behind Makshim flung up both his arms and slipped to the ground, one foot still caught in a stirrup. A long arrow had pierced him under the heart.

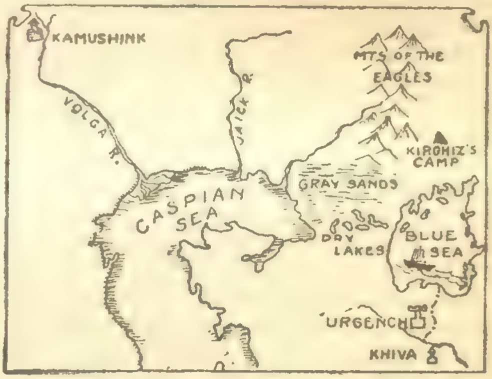
"A Turkoman arrow!" cried Kirdy, and as he spoke, unseen bows snapped and other shafts flew down from the heights.

"God aid us, sir brothers!" groaned a warrior who had been struck in the stomach. The horses snorted, and the underbrush crackled on both sides as the hidden archers plied their shafts. Kirdy beheld, from between rocks and the mesh of *tamarisk*, gigantic black lambskin hats atop lean and scowling faces darkened by the sun almost to the hue of the *kalpaks*. Still on foot, but with the reins of the piebald tight in his hand, he looked expectantly at Makshim, who gave an order calmly.

"Take up the wounded! Rush to the knoll up there"—pointing to a place where the gorge widened and a high nest of rock and thorn stood in the center of its bed. "Kirdy—back to the *ataman!* Back—I order it!"

The last was flung over his shoulder as he started up the gorge with the dozen survivors of the detachment. Kirdy hesitated for no more than a second. Makshim meant to hold the knoll until aid came up and had sent him to fetch it. An arrow glanced from his saddle as he jerked his pony around and mounted with a leap, whipping the swift-footed beast into a headlong gallop, swerving around boulders and scuttling through gravel beds.

In another moment he swung over to his right stirrup, gripping the piebald's mane, his own head pressed against the horse's neck. From the other side of the ravine arrows flicked down at him, but only at intervals. Evidently watchers had been posted here, and luckily for the boy, seemed so confident in their aim that they shot for the man instead of the horse.



Kirdy had time to reflect that an ambush had been set, and that the behavior of the Cossacks, when he dismounted to look for tracks, had made the Turkomans open fire before the time agreed on—or else the tribesman who killed the *esaul* had been unable to resist temptation when his shaft was drawn on so fair a mark.

Where the sides of the gorge fell away Kirdy met Demid and Ivashko at the head of a squadron of lancers already entering the shadow of the pass. He reined in, saluting, and told the *ataman* of the ambush.

"How many?" demanded Demid, thrusting his baton into his belt.

"Scores. I think more lie in wait above, father."

"You think—why?"

"Because they did not shout. They aimed at men, not beasts. They meant to kill off the advance so that more Cossacks would enter the trap."

"Well said! Makshim must be brought out"—he lifted his voice in a long shout—"Ivashko's *kuren* with me. At a gallop!

Kirdy, bring up the next *kuren* with matchlocks."

Angry because he was being sent farther to the rear, Kirdy trotted on, while Ivashko—who had succeeded the slain Ivan Aglau—passed with his men. The aspect of the Cossacks changed in an instant. They unslung their lances, and gripped tight with their knees; the ponies, sensing the feeling of the riders, neighed, and the song that had drifted up from the squadrons in the rear changed to a deep shout—

"Ou-Ha-aa!"

They began to smile and to joke with one another, well pleased at the prospect of fighting ahead of them.

"Are the Turkomans really there, little brother?" they asked Kirdy. "Or did the *djinn* of the gorge cast a spell on you? Make haste, brothers, or our little father Demid will scatter all the Turkomans!"

Pressing forward on the heels of the lancers, the matchlock men began to light their long fuses from a pot of fire that was carried near their officer. Charges and bullets were already rammed home. Kirdy went with them, because no more orders had been given him, and the rearmost squadrons already had the news and were forming around the wagons.

"There are the Turkomans right enough!" exclaimed the *ataman* of the *kuren*, a merry-eyed, pock-marked Cossack who was a famous drinker. "Only listen to their love song!"

In fact the ululation of the Muhammadans now echoed from rock to rock, answered by the defiant war cry of the Donskoi. Kirdy reflected that the assailants were standing their ground, and so must be in force. Demid was dealing with no small raiding party. And he felt that the ambush had been well chosen.

The low walls of the ravine were too steep for a horse to climb except with difficulty in certain places. The jumble of rocks and underbrush was well suited to the bows of the Turkomans, and hindered the Cossacks. He wondered if Makshim had acted wisely in seizing the knoll instead of riding back, or if Demid had not been reckless in plunging into the ravine with his lancers. And he wondered how the Turkomans had come there at all—whether a band had managed to find horses in Urgench and had circled ahead of them in order to hold the ravine against them if possible, or whether another tribe had come in from the desert and had sought to waylay the Cossacks.

REACHING the spot where the body of the *esaul* lay, he found that Demid and Ivashko had taken possession of the knoll, and the greater part of the lancers were scattered over the slope on the left, riding from cover to cover and driving the Moslem bowmen before them.

At a word of command from the pock-marked Cossack, those with firelocks dismounted and took open order on either side, loosing their pieces whenever the striped *khalat* or dark sheepskins of a Turkoman showed against the gray rocks and tamarisks. White smoke from the firearms billowed around the warriors and the reports thundered back from the far side of the ravine.

"Eh, little brother," said one who had been left to watch the ponies of the dismounted *kuren*, "those bees yonder can sting. Their shafts took the life out of Makshim, and only two were alive on the knoll when Demid came up."

On his way to join Demid, the boy came upon the body of Makshim lying propped against a boulder. The *kuren ataman* had been shot through the throat—his teeth showed under the dark mustache and the faded red coat that had been his pride was now stained a darker hue. The same crimson stain covered his bare chest and the ebony cross that he always wore around his throat. Bending closer, Kirdy saw that one side of the cross was set with precious stones in the Polish fashion, with some words inlaid in gold. This side of his cross Makshim had kept hidden always. It meant that he had been a nobleman, and though his coat was ragged, Makshim had never parted with these pearls and sapphires.

Valuable as the cross was, Kirdy did not take it. He thought of the words Makshim had uttered so often, mockingly:

"Ye are dead men, going whither?"

And he wondered fleetingly whither the spirit that had been in the body of the *ataman* had gone.

"Kirdy," the voice of his commander reached him, "the sixty lancers of Goloto's *kuren* are coming up. Take them and clear the height on the right. Hold your ground there, and do not pursue."

Running back to his pony, Kirdy saw

that a group of Turkomans on lean and long-legged horses had appeared on the edge of the slope and were shooting from their bows at the Cossacks with matchlocks below. A single rider would discharge a half dozen shafts while one of the clumsy firelocks was being loaded, and though the Moslems in full sunlight offered good marks, they kept their horses in motion so that it was hard to aim at them.

In the saddle again, he trotted up to the lancers who had been checked by the horses of the other squadrons and were looking around eagerly for Demid.

"Follow me," he said to the *esaul* in command, rejoicing that he had not been sent to bid them to do something, but to lead them himself.

"At command!" responded the sergeant, a wild looking Cossack from the Terek.

Kirdy had noticed that at one point a little distance back the edge of the height receded and bushes grew clear to the top of the slope. In the underbrush, he knew, the ponies would find better footing than in the loose shale and treacherous stones. And he hoped that if he turned back to this place his movements would not be observed as quickly as if he were to try to scale the height in the midst of the fighting.

Under Demid's eye he rather desired than avoided risk, but he thought that no sixty men could climb such a distance under the arrows of the mob of Turkomans. He had seen something of the work of those arrows.

Turning the half-squadron, he led it to the opening and, plying his whip, rushed the slope. His piebald snorted and started up, smashing through the network of *tamarisk* and often stumbling in the sandy clay. Behind him and on either side he heard the lancers snapping their long *nagaika* whips and muttering at their horses beseechingly.

They were out in the sunlight now, and shouts on their left told them that the riders on the summit had seen them and guessed their purpose. Kirdy's eyes were glued to the fringe of bushes that marked the top of the rise, and he expected every second to see a score of arrows flash down into his men. Then he thought they would have to dismount, which would be almost as bad.

He plunged up into a strip of sand, and out of the corner of his eye, saw the *esaul's* pony go down, the Cossack leaping clear.

Somewhere above him hoofs pounded on hard clay, and he remembered that he had not given command to draw sabers—remembered in the same instant that his men could not handle lance or sword in taking such a slope. Makshim's dark face with its questioning eyes flashed through his mind's vision.

Then his pony plunged up suddenly and came out on firm footing. Two Turkomans, in full gallop, were within stone's throw of him. The foremost on a bay horse was bare-headed, his skull shaven. Instead of boots he wore cotton shoes, the toes turned up, and his small eyes slanted like a Mongol's. A goatskin cloak floated from his bare shoulders and his mouth was open as if he were laughing.

All these details became clear to Kirdy in the second that the Turkoman drew back his arm and launched a javelin at him. In the same second Kirdy saw that the weapon would miss him. Mechanically he drew the curved saber on his left side, and the fever of uncertainty left him as it always did when he came to sword strokes. The prickling up and down his scalp ceased and he drew a long breath.

The Turkoman had whipped out a *yataghan* and bent low in the saddle. Kirdy reined his pony to one side, parried the slash of the twisted blade and struck down and back as his adversary went by. He felt his steel bite into the base of the man's skull and wrenched it clear.

The second rider had no javelin — for which Kirdy was thankful—and rose in his stirrups to cut down at him. Their swords clanged together and Kirdy edged the piebald closer shortening his stroke as he did so, because he saw others coming up. Letting the Moslem's scimitar slide off his saber he struck his hilt between the man's eyes—a trick he had learned from Khlit.

The Turkoman reeled in the saddle and a Cossack, coming up behind Kirdy, cut him down.

Kirdy did not see this, because a third Moslem attacked him, appearing suddenly on his left side. Lacking time to turn his pony, the boy tossed his sabre from the right to the left hand and as the two horses came together, struck down the other's scimitar. The Turkoman—a lean, stoop shouldered warrior in polished mail, who crouched behind a round leather shield—shouted in astonishment and dismay.

Running his blade up to the other's hand-guard, Kirdy pressed the scimitar down.

Feeling the strength of the young Cossack, the tribesman let go his scimitar and clutched at one of the half dozen daggers in his girdle. Kirdy was waiting for this, and caught the man's beard in his right hand. At the same instant he clapped heels into the piebald's flanks.

When the Turkoman struck with his dagger the blade met only empty air. He was pulled over the crupper of his saddle to the ground, where mail and shield availed him nothing under the lances of the oncoming Cossacks.

Meanwhile the *esaul* had caught the best of the three riderless ponies and was in the saddle, while enough Cossacks had climbed out on the summit of the rise to stem the rush of the Turkoman bowmen who came up in straggling order.

* * *

THEIR charge broken, the Turkomans wheeled and fled. But now the long lances and sabers of the Cossacks served them well and they followed Kirdy among the scattered Moslems, stabbing and splashing and shouting.

Swiftly as they pressed on, they could not overtake Kirdy. The boy crouched in the saddle, his saber arm swinging at his side and as often as a tribesman, hearing the thudding of hoofs, turned, snarling with hate, to match strength with him, Kirdy left a riderless horse.

The air rushed past his ears, and his eyes were quick and alert. The blood hummed through his veins, and though he would have liked to shout aloud, no sound came from his closed lips. For this work he was fitted. He was a master of the sword.

He had been following a warrior on a black pony, up a long slope, through a mass of boulders. Suddenly the Turkoman seemed to drop into the earth and Kirdy drew rein in astonishment. A wide gully opened out before him and down the nearer slope of this gully the black horse was leaping from ledge to ledge like a mountain sheep.

Kirdy was tempted to urge his piebald after the black until he looked around. During the pursuit he had climbed a wide stretch of rising ground, until he gained a small plateau—one of the highest points among the buttes. Shading his eyes from the glare of the sun he looked into the main ravine on his left. It was filled with Turkoman riders.

Others were in the gully beneath, that must run into the gorge where the main battle was still going on. He looked to the right and saw that most of the Turkomans had turned off in this direction and were being pursued hotly by his Cossacks who were drawing farther away every moment.

"*Stoy!*"

He remembered Demid's caution about pursuing too far, and called them back. They came obediently, albeit reluctantly, and when they had reached the top of the plateau, gazed curiously at the groups of Turkomans visible from time to time in the ravines to the north—and the wilderness of gray and purple buttes that stretched away from them on all sides.

"Eh, little father," the *esaul* looked up from a fine *yataghan* that he had brought back with him, "'tis a hard country and there will be hard blows struck before we win free of it."

He was smiling and the men of the half squadron were in excellent humor after their brush with the Turkomans—just such a skirmish as the warriors relished. Kirdy heard the sergeant relate how he had cut down three riders when he first came out of the ravine.

"Listen, my brothers! The first one our young *ataman* dealt with by a back-hand stroke. The second he played with, and then pounded between the eyes and left him for you to finish. I was close behind him and I saw it all. The third was a regular fox—wary and keen to bite. Eh, he took that one by the beard and pulled him out of the saddle. That was the way of it—out of the saddle just as peas are shelled from a pod."

"By the beard?" laughed another who was binding up a cut on the arm.

"As God is my witness. He is a falcon."

"We will not lack for saber work if he is to be our leader."

Kirdy was pleased by these words, because he felt himself that he knew little of the duties of an *ataman*, But the skirmish had given him confidence in himself and the Cossack lancers grinned when their eyes met his.

"*Esaul*," he observed after thinking a moment, "send a rider down to father Demid with this word: 'The Turkomans have a strong force in reserve in the gorge and others are coming up all the time.'"

"At once!" And the old Cossack added

ingratiatingly, "My name is Kobita. I was with little father Demid in Aleppo. That was a raid, but in ten generations the dogs of Turkomans will not forget this one."

Kirdy nodded and went to the edge of the gorge to see what was going on below.

The Cossacks had advanced up the gorge a half mile or so, and the firelock men were scattered over both slopes, their position marked by the plumes of white smoke. A squadron of lancers had cleared the bed of the gorge and in the rear the wagons and camels and the throng of wounded men were visible in the deep shadow of the ravine.

But the Turkomans were fighting every foot of the way. They held the edge of the far slope in force and their arrows flew down without ceasing. At times they rolled great boulders down the slope, and these had done more than a little damage to the led horses and wagons of the Cossacks.

Kirdy realized that the Cossacks were outnumbered, two to one—that they could not win through the ravines to the open plain beyond before darkness set in. Already the sun was nearing the pinnacles in the west.

After a while Khlit rode up, his heavy saddle-bags still in place and his pipe smoking. He studied the country on all sides and made a signal that was answered by a shout from below.

First one squadron, then another, moved up to the height beside Kirdy—the wounded men and the sacks of gold from the treasure wagons appeared, with the bodies of the Cossacks slain in the gorge—and finally Demid and Ayub with the last of the firelock men.

They moved into position around him, and Kirdy saw that they were going to spend the night on the plateau. To remain in the gorge was not to be thought of. They had left the injured horses and the silk and heavier articles of the treasure, perforce in the wagons which could not be hauled up the steep slope.

At this hour when the sun was setting, the cliff on the far side of the ravine was lined with Turkomans. Kirdy saw a tall man in a tigerskin cloak with a narrow black beard hanging down from the point of his chin. The level rays of the sun struck upon gleaming gold in the hilts of weapons in his girdle, and shone upon the white Arab he bestrode. He alone wore a green turban.

For several moments he gazed at the Cossacks and then wheeled away, followed by a score of riders.

"That would be their leader," Kirdy hazarded to Khlit.

"Aye, that is Arap Muhammad Khan, and there are worse leaders than he."

"The khan! How comes he ahead of us?"

"By luck and by good horse-flesh." The Wolf glanced at his grandson from beneath shaggy brows. "A wounded Turkoman was minded to mock us, and from his lips we learned that Arap Muhammad Khan was not at Khiva when we took Urgench. He was hunting upon a small river to the west with his amirs and a thousand of the horde. That was luck, good or ill. When a rider reached him from Urgench, he turned north—"

"There were no tracks in advance of us in the ravine—no fresh tracks."

"Eh, the khan knows this country as a tiger its lair. He must have entered the heights with his thousand by another path before the last sunrise."

"Then Demid did ill to ride into the gorge when he might have found another way through the ridges."

Khlit leaned on his saddle-horn and fingered the leather thong that held his saddle-bags in place.

"Little grandson," he grumbled "it is a simple matter to say of a leader 'He chose the wrong path.' Could Demid leave Makshim and his Cossacks to the arrows of the Turkomans? You have been put in command of a half squadron. See to it that your men loosen their saddle-girths and eat; then come to the council at the standard."

THE *kuren atamans* and Khlit and Ayub gathered around the pole of the standard of the white falcon in the second hour of the night when Kirdy, who had been posting sentries, rode up and dismounted. The bivouac of the Cossacks was quiet, except for the grating of the spades that were digging shallow graves, and the restless movements of the horses.

Down in the maw of the gorge the Turkomans could be heard moving about, seeking plunder; but they had not ventured to attack the plateau.

Ivashko was speaking as Kirdy squatted down behind the ring of Cossacks.

"—And we have lost forty-seven in the

ravine. We have no horses to spare. The water will be gone at noon tomorrow. *Hai*, it has gone hard with us."

"It will be better for us in the open country," said another.

"To go back is not to be thought of; to go ahead will cost many Cossack lives."

"The dogs of Turkomans are rolling heavy stones down below; it is plain they are blocking the ravine."

"Good!" cried Demid so unexpectedly that the *kuren atamans* were silent. "If they are at work in the gorge they will not look for us elsewhere."

"How, elsewhere?"

"The way we entered," hazarded Ayub's voice from the outskirts of the circle. "That is open."

Demid's short laugh was like a bark.

"Aye, open. Go thither, and before the shadows are short ye will meet with the Moslems coming up from Urgench."

It was Ayub's turn to be silent, and probably he was thinking of the palanquin and his cup-bearers of three days ago, because he chuckled.

"Eh, we frolicked in Urgench! Khlit, old wolf, what way does your nose point? What plan have you?"

"Dog of the devil!" grunted Khlit. "If your *ataman* had no plan, it would be time for me to speak, sir brothers. He has a plan and so it is fitting that we should listen instead of baying like hounds when the scent is lost."

Hearing this, the Cossacks crowded closer and held their breaths to hear what the young leader should say.

"The Moslem horde is gathering, and Arap Muhammad Khan is closing the passes. We must go forward before the next sunrise. We must join Goloto and the wagon train, a day's ride from this place. The Turkomans expect us to ride through the gorge where Makshim was slain. But on our right—see, as I sit here, on my right hand—a pass leads to the north."

Kirdy remembered that the bowmen he had scattered had fled down this gully, that twisted among buttresses of rock until it was lost to sight.

"In this ravine is the dry bed of a stream, and a stream would flow to the plain. So it is my thought that the gully will lead us out of these hills. It may be blind, or it may end in a precipice—God alone knows. But it offers a way out, my brothers, and thither we will ride at the end of the third watch."

"And we will leave the Turkomans rolling boulders," laughed Ayub.

"Perhaps," responded Demid dryly. "I will take the lead with Makshim's lancers. And now, to your men. See that the horses are fed and rubbed down with grass."

As they left the circle Ayub sought out Kirdy and put his good arm over the boy's shoulders. They walked past the men who were digging graves and the big Zaporoghian recognized the white-topped *kalpaks* of Makshim's squadron.

"Aye," he muttered, "the lads will be burying their father so that the jackals will not get at his body. Well, he was outspoken and if he was bold with his tongue he was no less so with his sword—a good Cossack and I would stretch out him that says otherwise. Will his spirit mount a stallion and ride with us on the morrow? Nay, Kirdy, he ever loved good sport, and it would go hard with him to lie pent down under rocks."

Crossing himself, the warrior sighed and then yawned heavily because he was weary. At the standard they parted, Ayub to roll himself up in his *svitka* and sleep and Kirdy to find his men and give them the news of the morning's march.

But of that march, begun before the first streak of light in the east, Kirdy saw little and knew less.

Kobita woke him with the whispered announcement that an *esaul* had come up from the standard with orders for the half-squadron to take the rear of the column. By the time the men were in the saddle and assembled, the leading squadron under Demid struck the Turkomans who had been left to guard the shallow ravine on the right.

The slight stir of the moving horses had attracted the notice of Moslem outposts half way up the plateau, but these, believing that the Cossacks would not advance until daylight—and then on the main gorge—merely fell back on their comrades by the boulder barrier.

And Demid's lancers must have surprized the guard in the other ravine, because when Kirdy passed the spot where the fight had been he heard only riderless horses plunging about the hillside, and the groans of wounded men.

He advanced into the utter blackness of the ravine and trusted to the piebald pony to keep its feet. Hoofs, clattering in advance and the distant creaking of saddles, guided him, yet there was no risk of losing the way because rock walls hemmed him in. They went forward at a round trot, and though Kirdy drew rein many times to listen and peer into the void behind him, he could hear no sound of pursuit.

A cold wind whipped through the narrow gully, and into the teeth of this they pressed, taking comfort with each moment of quiet, until the stars paled overhead and they could make out the familiar gray rock ridges on either hand—empty of life.

The gully grew wider, and for a while they halted, perforce. The column had stopped and the Cossacks of the squadron next in front of them were sitting their horses, listening to the clash of steel and shouting ahead.

Kirdy faced his men about as soon as he knew that Demid had been checked by a strong party of the enemy, and for an anxious half hour he and Kobita watched the gully in the rear grow lighter until the red showed in the limestone and the horses began to graze on the dry grass.

The veteran sergeant was clawing at his unruly beard, glancing anxiously into the eyes of his young leader. It was then that the boy realized that keeping the rear of a column in retreat was no simple matter. He tried to think how long it would take Arap Muhammad Khan to find out that the Cossacks had left the plateau and how long it would be before the Turkoman horde came up with them.

"Glory to the Father and the Son!" muttered Kobita thankfully when they heard the *kuren ataman* of the next squadron give the word to advance.

The sunlight was gleaming on the spear points of the column when Kirdy came to an open stretch. Here a strong detachment of Moslems had camped for the night—he counted the ashes of a dozen fires. Here, too, saddle cloths, *khalats* and weapons strewed the ground and a half hundred bodies of Cossacks and tribesmen lay in the sandy depressions and among the rocks. The Moslems were not Turkomans, because they were broad, stalwart men with full beards and small turbans knotted over one ear.

Many of them wore mail, and the weapons scattered among the bodies were scimitars and light spears—not the *yataghans* of the Khan's followers. Kobita and his mates had never seen such warriors, but Kirdy enlightened them.

"These be Uzbeks," he said gravely, "from the East. Some of them are from the cities under the roof of the world."

"Two hundred made camp here, little father," assented Kobita, "and it is in my mind that they used their weapons well. How come they here?"

"Pigeons."

The Cossacks nodded understanding, and some who had thought that Kirdy was over-young to command them, now were pleased that the grandson of Khlit should be able to tell them such things. As for Kirdy, he reflected that the Moslems from the surrounding districts were rallying to Arap Muhammad Khan and each hour increased the peril of the Cossack column.

In the early hours of the morning they passed from the ravine to an open slope that led them down to the northern plain in which Goloto and the wagon train awaited them.

CHAPTER XII

THE TABOR

THEY left the hills, no more than four hundred strong and many sorely wounded; and in the darkness the pack horses bearing the gold had been lost during the fighting, so that the iron-bound chest alone remained of the treasure of Urgench, but this, to their thinking, was the best part, and by then the lack of water weighed on them more than the loss of the gold. At noon the last goatskin of water was given to the wounded.

Whether Arap Muhammad Khan followed them closely they did not know, because a haze was in the air—fine sand stirred up by the bleak wind. The wind and the haze obscured their trail and they had some hope of throwing off pursuit; but it was no easy matter, now that the sun was obscured, to keep direction, and the most experienced Cossacks, casting ahead and to the flanks, were often at fault until they heard musket shots afar off.

"Goloto must be signaling to us," remarked Witless who—the pack animal train being a thing of the past—had been riding at Kirdy's stirrup.

"Eh, your stallion has more wisdom than you," cried Dog-Face who was never parted from the tall Cossack. "How could Goloto be signaling when he knows not if we be in Urgench or on the devil's gridiron? The *kuren ataman* is not a *koldun*, a magician."

"Nay, brother," Witless vouchsafed after long cogitation, "but Shamaki is a *koldun*, and you know the Tatar magician left Urgench the night before we took to the road."

"Only listen to him!" Dog-Face shook his head apologetically, but his comrade's remark seemed to stick in his head, because he muttered, "You have at least as much sense as a horse, and some men are only to be compared to camels and asses. Nevertheless, Goloto is an experienced leader and he would not burn powder unless he had to."

Dog-Face proved to be in the right, as they discovered when they headed toward the sound of firing. At sunset the air cleared and they could see the wagon train. It was drawn up in a hollow square with the horses within, and from the carts puffs of white smoke darted out, drifting away toward the heights.

Around the carts, as gulls flutter about a stranded ship, tribesmen circled, loosing their arrows and sweeping in—only to wheel away when the matchlocks barked in their faces. They numbered close to two hundred and when Demid's column neared the square of the *tabor*, Demid saw that the foemen were men in soiled sheepskins with enormous sleeves hanging to their boots.

They wore black lambskin hats even larger than the Turkomans'—were armed with a beggar's arsenal—and looked for all the world like dogs worrying a carcase. And like dogs they drew off snarling, to higher ground, there to squat and watch with insatiable eagerness. Kirdy knew that they were *Kara Kalpaks*—Black Hats, inveterate robbers, but lacking both the cruelty and courage of the Turkomans—jackals who followed a wolf pack.

The Cossack horses were too weary for pursuit. And indeed to pursue the Kara Kalpaks would have been more difficult than to track down the wind itself in these gullies.

Goloto strode out of the *tabor* and held Demid's stirrup while his forty men tossed their hats in the air and rained greetings on the dust-coated and tired squadrons.

"Health to you, *ataman*, and to you, sir brothers!"

"God be with you, Goloto! You have not been idle, I see."

"Nay, these vultures have been sitting up with us. May bullets strike them!"

When the wagons had been drawn into a larger circle, and men and horses had had a little water—for the spring was small and there was need of filling goatskins and buckets against the next march—Demid sought out Khlit who was sharing a barley cake with Kirdy by the fire.

"O father of battles," the young *ataman* said softly in Tatar, "tell me one thing. The horses are spent, the men sleep in their saddles. It is true that Goloto's oxen and horses are fresh, but that is not enough. To take the road now would be to waste strength in the darkness. I shall let my men sleep and move with the carts in the morning. Is this a good thing?"

Khlit chewed his gray mustache and looked for a long time into the fire before he answered.

"When there is little hope, the boldest course is best."

Demid inclined his head.

"Yet Arap Muhammad Khan will be up, with dawn."

"Well, do not trust his promises."

And with dawn Arap Muhammad Khan came up to the *tabor*. It was a shining day, clear and wind-swept and from Alexander's pillars of victory to the open plain a solid mass of Moslems surrounded the circle of wagons. Against the mauve and gray of the clay slopes fluttered the striped *khalats* of the Turkomans, and the long white coats of the Uzbeks. Farther away the Black Hats hovered on skeleton horses, and the level rays of the rising sun glittered on spear point and sword hilt and the silver head-bands of the ponies.

Standing in the wagons, the Cossacks counted three thousand tribesmen.

They had not long to wait. Kettle-drums sounded in the Turkoman horde, and a young warrior trotted out mounted on a black stallion, holding his right hand empty above his head. He was allowed to come within speaking distance of the *tabor* although more than one Cossack, matchlock in hand, eyed the horse longingly.

"O *caphars*," the Turkoman cried, "O unbelievers, are ye weary of life? Harken, then! I am Ilbars Sultan, son of the Khan, and by my mouth Arap Muhammad, Khan of Khiva, lord of Urgench and Kharesmia, Shield of the Faithful, Lion of Islam, Jewel in the Shield of Allah, bids ye lay down your weapons, O ye Urusses.[*] Submit and your lives will be spared!"

"Nay," Demid answered at once.

The small head of Ilbars Sultan turned toward the chieftain disdainfully, and after a moment the Turkoman spoke again.

"Harken, O ye Urusses—give to my father the leather-covered chest that is bound with iron, leave the wagons and oxen and ye will be free to ride to the north, weapons in hand."

Some of the Cossacks laughed and before Demid could make response, the wagon in which he was standing lurched, as Ayub climbed up beside him.

"The forehead to you, Demid. Allow me to answer the young cock. I know what you would say but I have finer words in my head."

Filling his lungs he shouted so that the nearest Moslems could hear plainly:

"Say to Arap Muhammad Khan, the slave galley cook of the Blue Sea, swineherd of Urgench, Jackal of Islam, Flea in the Bed-Sheet of Allah—the Cossacks will take care of their lives, and thank him for the hospitality of his castle."

Ilbars Sultan started as if stung, and seemed to strangle in the effort to find words. His rage was not improved by a roar of laughter that went up from the Cossacks—followed by a second shout when those who did not understand Turki had Ayub's response explained to them. The slim Turkoman spat toward the *tabor* and wheeled his horse without touching the reins, muttering something about "dogs of Urusses" as he galloped back to the Khan who was easily distinguished in the circle of *amirs* by his green turban.

A buzzing as of innumerable bees went up from the Moslem lines and in a moment the Turkoman horde, shields on arm, javelins and yataghans flashing, galloped down on the wooden fortress of the Cossacks.

A flight of arrows rattled harmlessly among the carts and when the foremost Moslems were fifty paces distant two hundred matchlocks blazed and roared. For a few seconds dense smoke covered the broken array of riders, and when it cleared the Turkomans were seen trotting back with several score empty saddles among them.

"Well done, sir brothers," bellowed Ayub. "We have singed their beards for them, the traitors. That is the way to answer when they try to trick you with words."

THE volley fired by the arquebuses affected the Moslems profoundly; the Turkomans had encountered firearms before now in the hands of the Persians, and during the fight in the gorge the Cossacks had been able to do little damage to the agile bowmen; but now, entrenched behind the *tabor*, they fired with deadly aim and the Turkomans were dismayed by the devastation wrought by the single volley.

And the Uzbeks and Kara Kalpaks, who knew little of arquebuses, were depressed.

It was an hour before Arap Muhammad Khan mustered his men for a second charge. This time the kettledrums sounded and the cymbals clashed, and the riders began to shout in chorus as they put their ponies to a trot. Instead of coming down in a single mass they separated into detachments of a hundred and began circling the *tabor*, sweeping in and out, to draw the fire of the Cossacks, stirring themselves into frenzy with their chant—

"*Yah hai—Y'Allah, il allah!*"

An experienced chieftain, the Khan knew that once the arquebuses were discharged, a half minute must elapse before they could fire again. If the Cossacks loosed another volley, he meant to strike in at once with his detachments and be upon the carts before a second volley could be fired. Meanwhile the drums and the shrill ululation spurred on his warriors and even the stolid Uzbeks on the hillside began to chant and finger their weapons.

The hour of grace had been put to good account by Demid. The young leader rearranged his forces. Bidding the *kuren atamans* select the seventy best marksmen, he placed every man in a separate cart on the whole circumference of the circle. With the marksmen he put two other warriors with arquebuses, giving them orders not to fire but to load the weapons of the first Cossack and pass them forward to him.

The sacks of grain, bales of hay and other baggage were piled on the outer side of the carts, to form a breastwork and between the wagons stood dismounted Cossacks with lances. The ponies were strongly tethered and the oxen yoked in a solid mass so that they could not break loose. He kept no warriors in reserve because he had none to spare, and because he counted on holding the line of the wagons, placed with the ends of their poles tied to the outer wheel of the cart in front.

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[*] Urusses—Russians. The Central Asia tribes until now had met only the Cossacks and believed them to be the same as the Muscovites.

So the Turkomans found that instead of holding their fire, the Cossacks began to pick off riders as soon as they came within bow-shot; moreover, no sooner had a Cossack discharged his piece than another arquebus blazed in his hands.

Firing in this fashion, the smoke clouds did not hide the Turkomans from view—the wind whipped the long coils of white smoke away. And the riders could not come near enough to use their bows, with effect.

But the Moslems were now in no mood to withdraw, and in spite of empty saddles and plunging ponies, swept in nearer. The arquebuses began to bellow in earnest, and suddenly a roar went up from the mass around the khan—

"Hour-roumm!"

With answering cries the bodies of horsemen turned in to the *tabor* and the Cossacks dropped the empty firelocks for sabers and lances. The clattering of steel blades began here and there, and rose to a din of maddened steel; horses screamed, lances cracked and the hoarse voices of struggling men swelled into a continuous monotone.

In this tumult, above the bellowing of the uneasy oxen, could be heard the battle cry of the Donskoi—

"Garda-bei!"

Here and there Turkomans jumped their horses over the wagon poles, but found no men on foot within the ring of the *tabor*. All the Cossacks were in the carts, and matchlocks and lances took toll of the riders who had broken the circle. Those on the outside fared even worse. They launched their javelins, and made their ponies rear against the carts, only to be pierced by the long lances, or beaten down by clubbed arquebuses.

For generations the Cossacks had been bred to the defense of the *tabor*, and squadron leader fought beside warrior, untiring and unbroken.

Seeing that the matter had come to hand blows, the Uzbeks came down to the aid of their allies and, fearing that the *tabor* was being carried and they would have no hand in the plundering, the Black Hats swarmed after.

Now the ululation of the Moslems drowned the shouts of the Cossacks, and dust swirled up in great gusts that writhed around the motionless wagons and the struggling men. The numbers of horses, moving haphazard about the *tabor*, handicapped the attackers who would have fared better dismounted. Some indeed jumped from the saddle and crawled under the wagons, only to find that the resourceful Cossacks had established a reserve.

Wounded men had taken to horse, armed with lance or saber, and patroled the space within the circle, leaving the wagons clear for their able-bodied companions. These riders made shift to pick off the Moslems who gained the cleared space.

Arap Muhammad Khan with his six sons led a band against the wagon where Demid stood under the standard of the white falcon. Here they met the pick of the Cossack swordsmen, and the long sabers of Demid and Kirdy and Kobita licked out and down, slitting the leather bucklers and slashing aside the lighter blades of the furious tribesmen. Here the wise and gentle Ivashko died, a javelin buried in his throat, and here the raging Ayub was stunned by a battle hammer.

Kirdy, ripping the scimitar from his right scabbard, held his ground against the press of Moslems. His lips close clamped, his eyes shining, he parried and cut with his two swords, slashing off now the forearm of a yelling Turkoman, now sending a *tulwar* or *yataghan* clashing to the earth.

In his shirt sleeves, spotted with blood, Demid fought in different but no less deadly fashion. Leaping back, and swaying first to one side then the other, his eyes roved ceaselessly over the pack in front of him, and he used now the point now the edge of his blade.

So perfect was his judgment, so flawless his control of the steel blade that he seemed to glide along the rail of the wagon, unhurried and smiling. Not so Kobita. The sweat poured from the sergeant's brow and blood ran from his mustache where the corner of his jaw had been lopped off. An arrow had struck him in the side and he had broken off the projecting end, and he groaned and howled when he moved.

All at once he flung back his head with a savage shout:

"Once my mother bore me. I will die, sir brothers!"

He climbed to the rail and leaped outward, falling sword in hand on a giant Turkoman who was shield-bearer to Arap Muhammad Khan. The weight and fury of the Cossack bore the tribesman from the saddle and they vanished under the pounding hoofs of the horses.

Now shouts were to be heard behind the wagon of the standard. Khlit had seen the struggle around the white falcon and had rallied a dozen of the least wounded from within the *tabor*. Climbing over the side of the cart these bleeding and gaunt warriors fell upon the Turkomans, snarling and roaring their battle cry.

"*Garda-bei!*"

Khlit had picked up a saber from somewhere, and—gray mustaches bristling and eyes smoldering—he struck steel against steel, and those who saw him in the press knew that if his lean old arm lacked strength his cunning was as great as ever.

The Turkomans gave ground, and a strident voice cried out—

"*Shaitani*—they are devils!"

Arap Muhammad Khan and his sons and *amirs* drew back, and they were the last to leave the side of the *tabor*. The riders of Turan and Iran reined back to the hillsides, licking their wounds, and they left six hundred dead behind them.

That night the Khan held a council, in which voices were raised and black rage unleashed. Yussuf Ghazi Khan, chief of the Uzbeks, asked pointedly where was the spoil that the Turkomans had promised him and the *Bij'aul* of the Black Hats swore by the breath of Allah that the Urusses were both devils and evil spirits. How else could four hundred men have withstood three thousand?

To all these the shrewd Turkoman made one answer—

"Wait."

During the night more tribesmen from the Caspian region came up to the siege of the *tabor*, and a few Persians from down the Amu River. Under their escort came Nur-ed-din, to throw herself at the feet of Arap Muhammad Khan, and to point out to him five hundred of his own men, survivors of Urgench.

So that in the morning the hillside was covered with Moslems and Arap Muhammad Khan pitched his tent, there to sit and nurse his revenge against the day when arrows and wounds and lack of food should deliver the Cossacks into his hand.

And, in the morning, the Moslems saw a strange thing. They saw the *tabor* get up and move away.

CHAPTER XIII

Death in the company of friends is like unto a feast.—MONGOL PROVERB.

WHAT happened was simply this. Without changing the position of the carts, the Cossacks yoked up the oxen, using the spare horses where oxen were lacking; then the carts at the north sector of the circle were half-turned and the beasts prodded into motion. The east and west portions of the circle merely moved ahead, and the wagons to the south closed in the gap, forming the rear.

The circle in this fashion became a hollow square that plodded steadily to the north. In front and rear, ten wagons were abreast —and twenty-five on each side. Within the *tabor* the horses that had not been hitched to the carts were crowded together. The wounded men were placed in the carts, and Cossacks with arquebuses and lighted matches stood beside them.

At first the Moslems thought that the *tabor* was changing ground. But by midday it was several miles on its road and they understood that the Urusses were attempting to fight their way in this fashion through the desert to the north.

Arap Muhammad Khan followed with his horde, and it was the second day before his men had recovered sufficient zeal to attack the moving *tabor*.

This onset was led by the Uzbeks who had heavier bows than the Turkomans and were perhaps a little ashamed of their consternation of two days ago. They sent their shafts at the exposed oxen and horses and brought down a good many. They suffered, too, from the fire of the Cossack marksmen and the chief gain of their efforts was to delay the wagon train.

Meanwhile the Kara Kalpaks, who had lingered at the spring by Alexander's pillars of victory to dig up the graves left by the Cossacks and to mutilate the bodies, had rejoined the khan and it was decided that evening to attempt an attack in the hours of darkness.

They observed that the Cossacks formed

the circle of carts again when they halted at sunset—herding the animals within the barrier, and it seemed an easy matter to the tribesmen to crawl up to the carts in the night and break through the line of defenders.

A thousand picked warriors made the attack, without sounding the kettle-drums or cymbals.

And they discovered speedily that it was one thing to overrun a camp of tents in the darkness and quite another to break a line of wagons lashed together and manned by desperate fighters who were not to be surprised. It was a clear night and the movements of the attackers were visible to the warriors who crouched behind the bulwark of sacks and bales. The matchlocks roared, and the cry of the Cossacks rose steadily above the confusion.

"Garda-bei!"

Moslem tribesmen never relished a night affray very keenly and when the old moon, wan as a silver scimitar, broke through the clouds, they scattered and ran from the *tabor* and many were the tales they told of fire-breathing demons they had faced and evil spirits that rose up from the ground to seize them by the throats.

The next morning the *tabor* plodded on, leaving a score of graves on the site of the fight, and Arap Muhammad Khan who had counted his own slain, looked grim. The Uzbeks took to their bows again, and many oxen lay outstretched on the plain. The Cossacks were more sparing of their powder, the khan noticed, and the next day the *tabor* moved very slowly, like a wounded panther crawling back to its lair.

But the Blue Sea was only a few hours away. Already they could feel the chill, salty winds that swept over it.

The scimitar of the moon was far in the west when Demid called the surviving *kuren atamans* to the standard. Besides Khlit and Kirdy only two leaders came—Goloto and another.

"It is time, noble sirs," the young *ataman* said quietly—"time that we must part and go upon different paths."

They uncovered their heads and stood in a circle around him, the fever of thirst in their veins. For a day and a night they had had no water; the goatskins had been squeezed to the last drop and many of the warriors had begun to open veins in the horses and to drink blood. And the horses themselves had become almost unmanageable. At first a few oxen and then many had begun to bellow, and the Cossacks knew that the wagons could not be drawn much farther.

"Listen then, *kunaks*," said Demid in the same drawling voice, "to the military command. We will divide, it is true, and for this reason. We will form in three squadrons, eighty men in each. I will take one and strike out through the Moslem dogs to the west; you, Goloto, will take your *kuren* and strike to the north; you, Khlit, will take those who are left from Makshim's squadron and Ivan Aglau's, and you will go with Ostap to the east. Two hundred and forty horses remain to us. You will seek whatever road offers to safety—each for himself."

When the leaders heard this they sighed and were silent for a long time. Finally old Goloto raised his voice:

"If the *tabor* is to be abandoned, why do we not mount and ride in one body upon the dogs of Moslems?"

"Nay, Goloto. The tribesmen are five thousand strong. If we rode together, some of us might win through, but the Moslems would not be cast off the scent. They would follow, and they have good horses. In the end, none of us would live. That is the truth."

All realized this and they waited for him to say more.

"By dividing into three bands we will confuse the Moslems, and one band or perhaps two might escape. I will take the standard with me; let the men choose what leader they will follow."

Some of the Cossacks departed to spread the tidings among the warriors; others went to saddle the horses. But Khlit remained at Demid's side, deep in thought.

"The treasure of Arap Muhammad Khan—" the old Cossack grumbled.

"Let it stay where it is," said Demid at once. "Who knows what is before us? If the jewels reach the border they must be given to the Muscovite Tsar because we pledged it."

Khlit seated himself on a dead horse, the curved saber that had once been Kaidu's, that he had cherished for many years, across his knees, and this served to steady his knees that quivered at times from weariness and the chill wind. This stiffness of the legs troubled Khlit, on the road, and when he was not in the saddle, he sat or lay near the fire to keep off the night cold; but for three nights there had been no fire. That night Kirdy had insisted on giving back to his grandfather the curved saber, saying that he could not use two blades in the saddle.

"Old Wolf," Demid resumed slowly, "you are wiser than I. Many times have you crossed these gray sands that lead to the roof of the world. I think that if any of the brotherhood win through to the border it will be your squadron. For this reason I have given you good men. Take also the Zaporoghian, Ayub. When the road is hard and foes press he is worth a score. Take Kirdy—the youth is a warrior, born out of the loins of chieftains; the day will come when the *bandura* players will sing his name, and a myriad sabers will follow him."

"I thank you, *ataman*, for that word." Khlit stroked down his mustaches and nodded, well pleased at the praise of his grandson. "But it can not be that way. The order was that all should choose which way they will go—with you, or with Ostap and me, or with brave Goloto. So must Kirdy and Ayub choose."

"Let it be so."

They listened for a space to the sounds of preparation, almost drowned by the deep bellowing of the oxen. In the Turkish lines, two musket shots away, the sentries heard only this monotone of the beasts, but the experienced chieftains caught the creaking of saddles, muttered whispers and the slight *clink* of scabbard against stirrup that showed the Cossacks were mounting and arranging themselves in three groups.

AND the minds of the two warriors dwelt upon other camps, where the mighty array of Cossackdom had held the border against the hordes of Moslems; their mind's eye beheld the horned standards carried from village to village and the laughing throngs of youths and maidens that crowded to see the gathering of the warriors. They saw great herds of horses grazing on the open steppe and the smoke of chimneys, hidden in the hollows by watercourses rising into the air.

In this hour of quiet they wished to speak only of matters that had brought honor to the brotherhood, because they did not know when they would speak together again.

"With Schah," muttered Khlit, stretching first one leg and then the other, "I went against the Golden Horde, and the Tatars cast the saddles from their ponies to flee the faster. That was the day the last of the Tatars withdrew from Christendom. Dog of the devil, is it not still a feast day in the churches? I have been in Cathay, and at the court of the Moghul of Ind—"

Demid glanced at him keenly for this was the first time that Khlit had been inclined to say so many words all at once, and he bent his head to listen attentively.

"In other lands." resumed Khlit after a moment of thought, "you meet with men who are bold and not lacking in love or daring. They are shaped like ourselves; they have children that they cherish and it can not be said that they lack for wars. But in one respect they are different. They have no brotherhood. Gold, and the embraces of young and white-breasted women are the things their hearts covet. You speak to them, but they give you no word of heartfelt fellowship."

He glanced up at the stars, listened for a while to the quiet movements of the warriors and went on:

"Nay, only men such as these"—he nodded at the shadows that passed and repassed the standard—"can enter into a fellowship where all is given and nothing is sought. Nothing is sought save the honor of the brotherhood. Is it not so? *Ataman*, it is so. I, who have lived two lifetimes beyond the border, have seen it. I have had other comrades, but none like these."

Thoughtfully he shook his head, not sorrowfully, but gravely, as a man who weighs all things. And Demid listened attentively, because the speaker was one who had been through the ceaseless toil of war, who had endured all suffering, and had gleaned the wisdom of hard years.

"And it has not failed them," the low voice of the old warrior went on, "the Cossack spirit. Not their minds, not ambition or the love of praise, sustain them—only the Cossack spirit is within them."

Demid lifted his hand.

"*I* have failed them."

Again Khlit shook his head.

"*Ataman*, not yours is the fault. The fault is the emperor's—who would sacrifice brotherhood to ambition. You have buffeted the Moslems; your strength has not failed; you have availed yourself of every expedient. And I, who rode at their side, say this: if the ancient *atamans*, Rurik and Schah and Skal Osup, could shout down to us now, they would put down their drinking cups up yonder at the table of the White Christ, and say 'Well done, *ataman!* Cossack honor has not suffered at your hands.' "

"I thank you, *koshevoi ataman*, for that word!" Demid cried, and when Khlit stood up stiffly they put their hands on each others' shoulders. Their talk had ended, and Ayub and Kirdy loomed up, already mounted.

"May the dogs bite me, Demid," grumbled the big Zaporoghian. "What are the *kunaks* saying? I will ride hence with no one but you."

He swore under his breath because thirst always tormented him more than wounds, and he was ready to pick a quarrel at once. But Demid, having said that the Cossacks were all free to choose their party, said nothing.

"And Kirdy," grunted Khlit, "will go with the standard."

Demid would have objected instantly to taking the youth from his grandfather, but the old warrior turned away impatiently. Khlit had suspected for some time that the best Cossacks were drawing up around Demid's standard and it was clear to him that Kirdy would have more chance to reach the border with the *ataman*.

"Enough said," he growled. "Go with God!"

"With God!"

The others repeated the farewell, and sought their horses. For a while these whispered words of leave-taking passed between the shadowy groups, and then the standard was lifted by a powerful Cossack. Sabers were drawn silently, the leaders took their places, and without any spoken command, reined their horses through the gaps that had been opened in the wagon ring.

CHAPTER XIV

THE SWORD SLAYERS

KIRDY had taken his place on the left hand and slightly behind the young *ataman*, and the standard with its guard of a dozen warriors was so near that the stirrup of the standard bearer struck against the flank of the piebald pony. Behind them some ninety warriors rode in a close mass without thought of formation.

When the last were free of the wagons, Demid put his horse to a trot, and at once a challenge rang in the darkness ahead of them. Voices cried out, and Kirdy saw the red embers of the camp fires drawing closer to them. Demid gave no single word of command, but kneed his horse into a gallop; he swerved a little to one side and his saber whistled through the air. From somewhere on the far side of the abandoned *tabor* came the *"Garda-bei!"* of the other Cossacks. Kirdy heard Demid's blade thud into something and a man screamed.

Then the black mass of picketed horses loomed up under their noses and the *ataman* turned to the left. Bows snapped at their flanks and near at hand the kettle-drums of the Moslems clamored.

Swinging away from the drums, to the right, they raced past a line of black hummocks that proved to be tents. Moslem warriors emerged from them, half clad, and were run down by the horses. Only one foeman appeared on horseback and he made straight at Demid, who rose in his stirrups with a laugh.

Kirdy reined in, as the two sabers struck sparks in the black void. A second time the blades clashed, and again Demid laughed under his breath.

"You are brave, my brother!"

The Moslem toppled from the saddle, and Kirdy, bending far down as he trotted past, saw the thick beard and the white turban set with jewels of Yussuf Ghazi, chief of the Uzbeks. The stars shone from a clear sky and now he could make out something of the ground in front of him.

It rose steadily, and he knew from the gait of the piebald that they were climbing a steep slope. No more arrows whistled past him and he looked back. The group of Cossacks was at his heels, the standard of the white falcon in the hand of the big warrior.

"Eh, little brother," the man grinned at him, "steel is still in our hands; we are still in the saddles—we have not yielded."

They scattered a mounted patrol that mistook them for Turkomans, and topped the rise that had held them back. Demid reined in for a moment to listen to the uproar in the Moslem camp. They were through the Turkomans and the Uzbeks and the open plain stretched away on three sides.

With a glance at the stars, the *ataman* turned sharply and headed north. The standard bearer lowered the long pole with its horned crest and the warriors bent forward, their heads against the manes of the horses. Kirdy, breathing heavily, counted off a hundred paces, when he saw Demid rise in the stirrups and then settle himself in the saddle.

The horses snorted as a shadow drifted under their noses from left to right. It was a wolf, and instead of fleeing from them the animal had crossed their path. Kirdy, peering to the left, made out what seemed to be a mass of bushes on the plain. In the half light of the stars and the pallid scimitar of the moon all objects were vague and unreal—the wolf a shadow, the tamarisks might have been mounted men.

From the dark mass he heard a rustling as if the wind were sweeping through dry grass, and he bent toward Demid.

"Yonder are men in the saddle, little father. I think they are Kara Kalpaks, and no patrol but a whole tribe."

"Aye," said Demid quietly, "ride on!"

The Cossacks urged on their ponies silently, needing no warning of this new danger, trusting only that the tribesmen were bound for the camp, where the drums still muttered. Kirdy remembered that the Kara Kalpaks had always withdrawn for the night into the hills or the plain, to plunder or carouse.

And surely the Kara Kalpaks had the eyes of panthers that see in the dark, because presently a long drawn howl went up from the moving mass of them. They started in pursuit and the Cossacks saw at once that the Moslem's horses were both fresh and swift. They drew abreast of Kirdy and arrows began to whistle.

The piebald stumbled heavily and the boy was nearly thrown. But the pony recovered and sped on, tossing its head, and passing Demid's big bay. Again the *ataman* rose in the stirrups, and laughed under his breath.

"It is a race, little brother."

Wind whipped past Kirdy's ears; the howling of the Black Hats grew fainter. He touched the neck of his pony and found it slippery with hot sweat. At the touch the piebald seemed to gather itself for a plunging rush that ended in another stumble.

And then Demid reined in with an exclamation. They had drawn a little ahead of the remaining Cossacks, and the Kara Kalpaks had swerved in between the squadron and its leaders. At the first clash of sabers, Demid jerked his bay around and headed back toward his Cossacks. When Kirdy tried to turn the piebald, the sturdy pony staggered and fell, the boy jumping clear. The horse had been struck by an arrow and it did not rise.

Kirdy began to run back toward the fight. And now the plain seemed to be filled with galloping horses. He peered into the murk, seeking for one with an empty saddle. Demid had vanished, and the night was filled with the clashing of weapons and shouting. Three riders rushed past him—a single Cossack pursued on each flank by a tribesman.

Hoofs thudded behind the boy and as he turned with upflung blade his skull seemed to split in twain. Instead of the tumult, a roaring filled his ears and the murk of the night became red as flame. The sea of red swept over him and he felt himself falling into its depths.

KIRDY opened his eyes, and became aware that the sun was shining. He lay on his back in sand, and though his limbs felt icy cold, the sand was warm. After a while he tried to turn his head, and thought that it must be held by something because he could not move it.

Blood had stiffened on his scalp, but when he explored his head slowly with his fingers he found that the bleeding had stopped. By and by he was able to turn his head and the first thing he saw was his hat, one side slashed open. It was clear to him that a weapon had struck his head and that the thick sheepskin hat had saved his life.

The second thing he saw was a group of Kara Kalpaks moving on foot toward the body of a Cossack a stone's throw away. If the tribesmen were dismounted, and the sun above the horizon, the fight must be over. That was all his mind could manage to grasp. He closed his eyes, so that the oncoming men would not see that he was alive.

He felt no pain, his head felt as if it had no weight at all, and he was satisfied that the fighting should be at an end. It seemed to Kirdy that he had been struggling against foemen for many years and he was too weary to think about it any longer.

When he did not hear the Kara Kalpaks passing after several moments he opened his eyes gradually. The tribesmen were occupied in stripping the garments, stained with blood, from the Cossack, who groaned a little at times. They were quarrelling about the boots, which were good ones of soft deerskin. One of them pressed his spear point several times into the chest of the wounded man, and the groaning ceased. The Cossack stretched his legs out and lay quiet.

Then those of the tribesmen who had not secured anything of the dead man glanced at Kirdy and walked toward him, talking. The boy did not see any use in feigning death, because in a moment he would be dead in reality. He did not feel any fear, but thought it would be better to stand up.

So he raised himself to an elbow and somehow got on his feet, staggering to keep his balance. The plain and the approaching men went around before his eyes in swift circles, and he beheld vultures drawing nearer in the sky. They came slowly as if they had already fed.

Hands gripped his arms and his white camel's skin *svitka* was pulled off roughly. Then he was knocked down by the blow of a fist and his red morocco boots were taken from his feet.

A stab of agony went through his skull and words came to his tongue.

"It is good that I gave the curved sword to Khlit," he said weakly, "because it is a fine weapon and once belonged to Kaidu."

Murmurs of surprize greeted this; he had spoken in Tatar which some of the hillmen understood. They talked together, but the boy did not know what they said. He was only glad that Khlit had the curved saber and that by no fault of his would the weapon fall into the hands of thieves.

Presently they took him by the arms and he walked some distance, his head growing warmer and throbbing. His thoughts cleared at the same time, and he saw that he was being led into a large group of warriors, some Turkomans among them. Young Ilbars Sultan the boy recognized by his small white turban with a heron's feather held by an emerald clasp.

The chieftain was looking at a body, and Kirdy saw that this was Demid.

It was hard to tell how the *ataman* of the *Donskoi* had been slain because he had been slashed in so many places. His chest was cut open and his forehead had been split. Kirdy counted the bodies of five Kara Kalpaks around and beneath Demid. They had all been slashed once on the side of the head or the throat.

Ilbars Sultan was warning the Kara Kalpaks not to touch the garments of the fallen *ataman*. He himself had picked up Demid's sword and was looking at it curiously.

"Eh brother," said a Cossack voice, "the little father was hard pressed. Look, he used the edge only, and not the point at all. That shows he was hard pressed."

The speaker was Witless, stripped to his shirt, standing between two Turkomans.

"Demid might have ridden free," muttered the boy. "Yet he turned back."

"He turned back!" echoed the thin warrior, and all at once tears began to run out of his eyes. Shaking his head he wept quietly. "May the Father and Son receive him!"

Rousing from his stupor, Kirdy turned to Ilbars Sultan and said in fluent Turki:

"Do not strip this body. He is the chieftain and by that same sword Yussuf Ghazi fell."

The young Turkoman uttered an exclamation, and when he had looked at Kirdy, said to those around him:

"Take these two warriors to the khan, my father. He will question them and after that they can be tortured."

A half dozen of the Kara Kalpaks moved off with the two captives and Kirdy stepped to the side of the stupid Cossack.

"Did any of the Cossacks break through?" he asked.

Witless gazed around at the Moslems who were plundering the dead, and at the vultures in the sky.

"How could any escape, little brother," he said plaintively, "when they all lie here on the plain? It would be better for us if we had not escaped."

And Kirdy thought that this was the truth.

CHAPTER XV

THE LEATHER CHEST.

TWO days passed before Kirdy and Witless were led into the presence of Arap Muhammad Khan. During that time the position of the Turkoman camp had not changed, and the Cossacks gleaned some hope from the fact that most of the tribesmen were absent from the camp. On the third day the warriors who guarded them bound their wrists in front of them.

They were taken past the deserted *tabor* to a knoll where the Moslem *amirs* were gathering around the black tent of the khan. And the first thing they saw was the head of Goloto, with the nose and the ears cut away, fastened on the point of a spear. Only by the familiar scar did the two Cossacks recognize the head of the *kuren ataman*, on this spear that held up the outer edge of the canopy under which the khan sat, on a silk rug.

By the side of Arap Muhammad Khan was the slender form of Nur-ed-din, veiled to the eyes, and by a flicker of the brows and a flash of the brown eyes Kirdy saw that she recognized him. Before the knees of the Turkoman chief rested the leather chest, evidently locked, because two warriors were prying open the lid with spear points.

"Aye, Kirdy," said the thin Cossack when they were struck down to their knees beside the chest, "the sir brothers did not yield. They took many of the infidels with them out of the world."

In fact the eyes of Arap Muhammad Khan were moody as they surveyed the chest and a small pile of weapons cast down near it. His riders had brought back little spoil and hundreds of them had not come back to the camp. Many riderless horses, it is true, were gathered in the *tabor*—but these had belonged to his own tribesmen or to the men of Urgench. All at once his hands gripped his knees and he leaned forward with an exclamation.

The lid of the chest had come off and he could look into it and see plainly that it contained a generous amount of sand and pebbles.

"Y'Allah!" he breathed, and the tribesmen who had brought in the chest fell back in dismay.

A tall man was Arap Muhammad Khan, and he seemed taller than he was by reason of the voluminous striped *khalat* wrapped around his broad shoulders; his head, too small for his body, was dwarfed by a high turban of green silk, loosely knotted over his left ear. But his black eyes, set close to the beak of a nose, flamed with rage as he looked from his men to the Cossack prisoners.

Then, fingering the tuft of beard—both sides of his jaw were shaven—he turned to Nur-ed-din.

"From thy lips, O Light of the World, I learned that the precious stones, the amber, the pearl strings and the emeralds were placed within this chest by the dogs of Urusses."

The beautiful Persian bent her head.

"By the Kaaba I swear that this is true, O lord of my life, O conqueror—" submissively she spread out both hands. "My servants watched the little house by the *kurgan* gate, whither the Nazarene unbelievers took the wealth of thy dwelling. The bulkier part was loaded into wagons and this chest was carried out with care and bound into place and guarded straitly. All has been found save this alone."

"Aye, by the beard and the teeth of Ali—all but this!" He glowered at her and flung a command at the anxious warriors, "Torture the Franks with fire and stay not until they tell of the hiding of the treasure!"

"Yet," cried the woman, "leave me the young warrior. I will try him with words," she whispered eagerly, "and by favor of the All-Wise may I prevail with him."

Some of the talk Kirdy had caught, and he put his hand on the shoulder of Witless.

"They will torture you, sir brother. If I live, they will remember your death."

Moslem spearmen jerked the tall warrior to his feet, and Witless lifted his head to look at them with dignity.

"I thank you, *kunak*," he said slowly, "and even if I am not so wise as other knights, I shall not yield to them—they will learn that a Cossack does not fear torment." He sighed, clasping his hands. "If you would ask them to give me a cup of wine. I am very thirsty and Dog-Face drank up the last skin we had between us four nights since."

In the best Turki he could muster Kirdy made the request, and the tribesmen mocked at him, one of them taking the trouble to spit into Witless' face. Then Kirdy's companion was led away, sighing, but with head high and shoulders squared.

Before his guards could prevent, Kirdy sprang to his feet and cried out, to Arap Muhammad Khan:

"That is ill done, O lord of the Turkomans. *Yah ahmak*—the man is afflicted in the brain and by the law of your prophet such are spared pain."

"*Hai*—he can tell us of the hiding of the treasure."

"Not he!"

A slow smile stirred the thin lips of the khan, as he studied the boy's tense face.

"If not he, then thou."

Kirdy kept silent. Khlit had arranged the packing of the spoil in Urgench, and the boy remembered that he had seen the old warrior place the finest emeralds and precious stones in the millet that he carried in his saddle-bags. The leather chest had been no more than a blind—a safeguard against thieves who might steal into the Cossack camp. Even Ayub had not known that the chest he watched over so carefully held no more than sand and stones.

It was like the Wolf to hide away his spoil where no one would look for it, and where it would be under his eye. Khlit, too, had appropriated the three best Kabarda stallions of the khan's stables. It was possible that he had won clear of the Turkomans, for many of the bands were still absent from the camp.

Kirdy was nerving himself to face the torture when Nur-ed-din slipped to her feet and came to him.

"O chief's son," she whispered, "I have begged a boon of the khan and that boon is thy life. Aforetime thou didst spare me when command was given to slay, and we of Islam remember more than our wrongs."

Many of the *amirs* and warriors in attendance had left to watch the fate of Witless, and at a sign from Arap Muhammad Khan the others went away from the knoll, except the spearman who stood behind the boy and the swordbearer of the chieftain. A devout Moslem does not care for his sons and officers to gaze at one of his women when she steps from his tent even when she is veiled.

The voice of Nur-ed-din was soft and swift as running water, and her full, dark eyes were innocent of guile.

"One price the khan must have for thy life. He must know where the jewels of Urgench lie hid."

"I know not."

For a second she hesitated, her glance full on him. Perhaps she could read more than a little of his thoughts, but surely she could read his face, and she knew that there was more he could tell.

"Thou art brave, my warrior! Think! Alone of the Urusses"—she paused to glance fleetingly up the hillside where the scattered bodies still lay unburied, but attended by kites and a multitude of jackals—"thou art living. None can hear thy words. What reason, then, to play the fool? Arms, a horse and honor await thee in the brotherhood of true believers. And what is faith—save the mumbling of priests, and the saying of prayer?"

"This," said the boy sturdily, "is our faith. We gave pledge to the Muscovite khan that we would bring him the jewels of Urgench. These others have kept faith. Shall I betray them?"

He spoke out of a full heart, but the shrewd Persian took his words to mean that he had some knowledge of the khan's treasure.

"Think!" she whispered again. "What avails it to keep silence now? The emeralds will never leave the Turkoman land."

To this he nodded assent, but when he said nothing more she frowned.

"There are tidings I can give thee. Consider this, O youth of the Urusses. My eyes are quick, my memory is long. In the courtyard of Urgench I saw thee ride away with an old man. Today I have seen that same warrior."

"Nay," Kirdy laughed, "that is surely a lie."

"I knew him by the Kabarda he was leading—a favorite of my lord. Aye, swift as the black storm wind and sure of foot is the gray stallion. The old man no longer had his coat, and a Kirghiz shawl was wrapped over his shoulders, one corner upon his head—he looked like a Kurd who had been plundering in the upper valleys. At first I did not think he was a Cossack, but now I remember him."

"And now?"

"Now he will be searched out and cut down like a jackal unless we find the treasure. And as for thee—" she smiled, pointing to a dense crowd of Turkomans. From within the throng rose slender wisps of smoke. Yet Kirdy heard no outcry from the place where Witless was being tortured by fire.

That Nur-ed-din had seen Khlit he doubted. It was impossible to tell when the woman was speaking the truth.

"He was searching among the bodies," she added quickly, her eyes fast on his, "turning them over to look at the faces, and *that* was not like a Kurd, who would have looked only for spoil. I saw him last near the horse herd, in the *araba* ring."

She indicated the *tabor*, and Kirdy felt his heart sink. It would be like Khlit, who was utterly reckless of his own life, to come back to seek out his body. The old Cossack did not look like one of the Donskoi and from boots to girdle he had been clad in a haphazard fashion of his own. Nur-ed-din's description of him was apt enough.

He dared not ask if Khlit still had the saddle-bags, and a quick scrutiny of the camp and the ridges beyond it failed to reveal a trace of his grandsire. But if Khlit still had the jewels, Kirdy knew that they could not buy their lives. He had seen the sullen, brooding eyes of Arap Muhammad Khan.

"I know naught of jewels or of a hiding place," he said.

Nur-ed-din glanced over her shoulder at her master and then at the group of spectators that had begun to scatter. One of them shouted something and Kirdy understood that Witless had died.

"Fool!" cried Nur-ed-din. "To be torn like that great buffalo over there!"

Biting her lip, she stared at him, at the taut muscles of his bare arms, the pulse throbbing in his brown throat, at the dark circles under his quiet eyes.

No longer was the woman mocking him; anger and regret struggled within her, and she sought in vain for words. Against the barrier of the youth's silence she could find no weapon; nor could she break this quietude in which he mustered his strength to meet the torture.

"Y'Allah," cried the khan. "What is this?"

ONE of the wagons in the *tabor* ring had been moved out of place and through this opening the horses were streaming. Both the Turkoman and the Cossack knew that they were being driven, but not by the horse-guards who were running and shouting, trying to head off the leaders. The half wild ponies separated and plunged through the camp while others poured from the wagons.

Some of the horses raced past the knoll, and for an instant Kirdy wondered if Khlit had turned them loose to divert attention from his own movements. But Khlit was not to be seen within the *tabor* or near it—only yawning Turkomans rolled out of their blankets or crawled from their half-tents to see what the shouting was about.

It was the first hour of the afternoon and most of the warriors had sought shelter from the heat of the sun.

And then above the drumming of hoofs the boy heard Khlit's voice.

"*Na kon!* To horse!"

At the same time he saw the old Cossack trot from between two of the black tents. Khlit was riding one of the Kabardas and beside him the gray stallion tugged at its rein and reared, excited by the tumult and obviously unwilling to play the part of a led horse. Kirdy realized two things—he must act instantly and he must reach the gray horse.

Arap Muhammad Khan and Nur-ed-din could not see Khlit, but the guard at the boy's back had half turned to glance down at the two splendid ponies. It flashed through Kirdy's mind that the Turkoman had heard the khan say he was to be tortured, and so would hesitate before cutting him down.

Without moving his feet he leaped back and the spearman staggered. The boy darted past him and sped down the sharp slope of the knoll. He had a fleeting glimpse of Arap Muhammad Khan springing to his feet, and the nearest *amir* drawing a scimitar from his girdle.

A dozen paces and he knew the Turkoman guard had not cast the spear. Then he heard the man's feet pounding behind him.

Khlit urged on his horse and when Kirdy raced down upon him, dropped the rein of the gray. Groping under his shawl the old warrior pulled out the long curved saber and Kirdy heard it whistle over his head—heard, too, the thud of steel against bone, and the heavy fall of the Turkoman who had pursued him.

The gray stallion reared and Kirdy reached for his mane. The leather thongs on his wrist had half-numbed his fingers, but the plunge down the knoll had set the blood moving through his hands again and he leaped into the saddle. He thrust his bare feet into the short Turkoman stirrups as the horse started after Khlit's pony.

Behind him he heard a long drawn shout from the knoll—

"*Yah hai, Y'Allah, il allah!*"

A glance over his shoulder showed him the Turkomans running for their horses, and Nur-ed-din standing like a statue before the deserted tent of the khan. Another moment and the two Cossacks had put the *tabor* between them and the knoll and the riderless ponies from the herd were thick around them.

Out of one of the wagons crawled a wizened figure that sped to a thin and mean looking pony that was grazing patiently near them. By his wide-brimmed black hat and greasy sheepskins Kirdy recognized Shamaki, and thought that the *koldun* must have started the stampede of the ponies.

Khlit leaned over and drew the blade of the saber across the cords on Kirdy's wrists without troubling whether or not he cut through the boy's skin. It took two good hands to manage the restless stallion that neighed with up-flung head and was more than willing to run down any riderless pony that ventured too near.

For a while the horse engaged all the boy's attention. He was aware of warriors who stared in bewilderment at the old Tatar and the gray-haired rider who looked like a Kurd and the young rider without cloak or boots or weapon. By the time the band that had started in pursuit came up with the watchers, the Cossacks had passed the fallen pillar that marked the entrance to the gorge through which ran the caravan track.

They had a start of five hundred yards, and Kirdy laughed exultingly as he realized that the splendid Kabardas were fresh.

They thundered by scattered fires of the Kara Kalpaks, and Providence so far aided them that they met no parties of tribesmen returning to camp through the ravine. When they came out on the plain beyond the ridges, they saw that the pursuers had lost a little ground.

Then the three steadied the horses and settled down to a long gallop, their eyes on the heights to the north that formed the barrier around the Blue Sea.

When darkness clouded the plain a few Turkomans had drawn up to within two bowshots of Kirdy and his companions. Glancing over his shoulder from time to time Khlit waited until the glow in the west had faded from orange to a deep scarlet.

With a word to the others, he took his whip and snapped it down the flank of his bay pony, and the gray stallion quickened his pace, unwilling to be left behind. The matchless Kabardas had been held in until now, and after five hours they still had a race left in them. Shamaki had been using his whip for the last hour but the gray stallion was only sweating under the saddle and flanks.

They entered a network of gullies, and the Tatar took the lead. Kirdy had heard the Cossacks say that the conjurer could see in the dark. If this were not true, Shamaki knew the country well. He turned up a steep trail that led through a mass of boulders, and turned again sharply into a sandy ravine where the horses moved silently. Here he halted to breathe the ponies and listen with his ear to the ground.

"Come," he grunted after a while, "we must be in the saddle. The *kibitka* is far from here."

* * *

WHEN they moved on, guided by the Tatar, Khlit told the boy what had happened in the last days.

The column led by Ostap and himself had been fortunate. It had penetrated the Turkoman lines, losing only a score of men. Evidently the tribesmen were not so numerous on that side, and the Cossacks had reached these same heights, where Ostap and Khlit were at some pains to hide their trail. The next day they had come out on the shore of the Blue Sea. They worked to the east until they found a bay where fresh water appeared in a spring among the rocks. This bay was sheltered, and here they decided to rest the exhausted horses and themselves.

They did not know on what point of the sea they had come out, and to ride farther along the edge of it would bring them inevitably into contact with the bands of tribesmen searching for them. They had wiped out their trail in the water and posted sentries on the ridges around their camp.

For food they were able to catch plenty of fish in the shallow bay. Khlit had found Shamaki quartered in a hut a couple of miles from the camp. The Tatar, who had been traveling two days in advance of the Cossacks, had seen them riding in the water and had come to meet Khlit.

Shamaki had heard from passing tribesmen of the fate of Demid and his men, and that Goloto had been cut off in the hills. Together the old warriors turned back to search for Kirdy's body. How Khlit had persuaded Shamaki to accompany him he did not say; but the boy fancied that the

Tatar was more afraid of the Wolf than he was of the Turkomans.

It was Shamaki who learned that Kirdy was a prisoner with Witless on that last day, and when Khlit saw the Cossack led out for torture he sent the Tatar into the *tabor* to stampede the horses while he worked nearer the tent of the khan with the gray stallion.

CHAPTER XVI

When a Cossack is born a sword is placed at his side; by it he lives and dies. By the cross in the hilt he prays and by the shining blade he takes oath. When the Blue Sea dries up and the Roof of the World is level with the plain—then the Cossack will ride over the steppes without a sword.

WHEN the wind began to bite with a damp, chill touch and they heard the murmur of a swell on a wide shore close to them Shamaki dismounted and led his horse into a stand of dead poplars. Here was his *kibitka*, an abandoned wattle hut in which he had taken shelter. By the strong smell of wet rushes Kirdy knew that they were almost on the beach.

The wind rustled the brittle limbs of the poplars, and the sedge growth beneath, but a louder rustling made the boy's skin crawl. Shamaki, too, halted as if puzzled, and they listened in silence.

By now the hut was visible—a black bulk in the gray trunks—and from it came the flapping of wings and a man's voice in a continuous groan. Khlit and Shamaki left the horses standing and circled the hut while Kirdy walked to the opening. There was only one voice, and it seemed to excite the eagle that Shamaki had left chained in the shack to a kind of frenzy—until man and bird became quiet.

"Spawn of the Horned One," there came a roar in broken Tatar, "the devil knows who you are, but I'll send you to greet him. Just bend your heads and enter—"

"Ayub!" cried the boy.

"Stand back!" growled the Zaporoghian. "That is Kirdy's voice, but are you in your body? Are you spirit or are you human?"

"Nay, here is Khlit and the *koldun*, Shamaki. That is his eagle in the *choutar*."

A towering form staggered through the entrance and a massive hand gripped the boy's shoulder, and through the shirt Kirdy could feel the heat of fever. "*Ptitzy Boga s Vamy!* May God send you joy! *Hi*, old Wolf—*Hi*, you dog of a Tatar! Truly the Father and Son have saved you, for otherwise it is not possible that you could be alive."

"How came you here?" cried Kirdy joyfully, because he had thought Ayub slain, and could not understand how the big Zaporoghian had come through the Moslems with a broken arm. He knew Ayub too well to think that he would have left Demid of his own will.

"By the *buntchauk*, the standard, little brother. Only look!" Ayub reached into the hut and pulled out the crosspiece of the Donskoi standard, with its white falcon's head and flowing buffalo tails. The pole had been broken off close to the end, and Kirdy uttered an exclamation of delight. For weeks he had watched the white standard advancing at the head of the column and he was glad that it had not fallen into the hands of the Moslems. He remembered that he had not seen it at the feet of Arap Muhammad Khan in the black tent.

A grim word of praise from the darkness showed that Khlit, too, had recognized the standard—what was left of it.

"It was this way, my falcons," rumbled Ayub, his ready tongue spurred by the fever. "The bearer of the standard was slain by an arrow of the Kara Kalpaks and fell underfoot. God never meant that the dogs of Turkomans should put their claws on the *buntchauk*. I dismounted and cut loose the pole with my saber, so that I could thrust it under my leg. But when I was in the saddle again, the saber work was going on all around and I could not find Demid. I heard the war cry of some of the brothers and reined toward them, but they were Goloto's men."

He paused to sigh and moisten dry lips.

"I rode with Goloto into the hills and only half his men were left in the saddle. There I parted with him, and the black devils were all around. I slew a score on my way to this place—may the grass grow over them! I thought I saw some of the brothers riding along this shore. Then I came upon a boat. My horse had broken its fore leg and I cut its throat with my saber. It was clear to me that God did not mean that the Turkomans should cut off my head, because I found the skiff hidden in the rushes, with a mast and sail in it. A fox's hole smells sweeter than that fisherman's boat but it is sound, I think. I was weary and could not move it into the water, but now that I have slept—where is Demid?"

Kirdy glanced at Khlit, and after a moment the old warrior spoke gently.

"Ayub, Demid had a hero's death under the swords of the Turkoman horde."

Ayub bent his head to peer at them.

"How—what is that? The Turkoman horde—they could not take the Falcon."

"They could not take him," assented Kirdy quickly, "he was through their lines when he turned back to aid his men. He is dead."

For a moment Ayub was motionless and then he did not cry out. With his good hand he tore at his hair and ripped the sling from his broken arm. Drawing long, panting breaths, he clawed at the stiffened muscles of his left arm.

"Give me the reins of a horse!"

In his overwhelming grief the big warrior wished to mount into a saddle and ride headlong, wherever the horse would take him. When he began to run toward the ponies, Kirdy and Khlit caught him by the shoulders and, for all their strength, were knocked aside like children. Then the Wolf tripped Ayub and Kirdy threw himself on the Zaporoghian, throttling him until he grew weaker, and Shamaki, who had seen him in a fury before, came up from the beach with a hatful of water, dashing it into his face.

The fitful strength of the fever ebbed and Kirdy rose, leaving Ayub stretched out on the ground, groaning:

"*Ai-a, moi sokoli!* Here am I—dog, clown, boaster—I live and Demid the Falcon is slain. Grant me death, sir brothers."

"It is not far away," growled Shamaki, who had been looking around for Khlit vainly.

"He pulled me out of the water by the scalplock! He took all the gold out of a castle to ransom me when I was put in the stocks. Of all that he had, he never took anything for himself—his word was without blemish, like clean steel. Never did a finer *ataman* come to the side of the White Christ. All the elder heroes will greet him, and make way for him at once—they will bid him to their bread and salt."

He ceased speaking only when Khlit trudged up, bearing a heavy-burden that revealed itself as the two saddle-bags. He had hidden them in the sand a short distance from the hut, and investigation proved that the jewels were still safe.

Then, glancing at the stars, he said that they must join Ostap's Cossacks in the bay near-by.

"Wait, *koshevoi!*" Ayub held up his hand and sighed. "Are any left from Demid's command?"

"Only Kirdy."

"*Hai*—it has gone hard with the Donskoi. If we must join Ostap and his men I will not hang back. But not a Cossack is alive in their camp yonder. The Turkomans are swarming over it like bees. Two thousand of them surrounded the camp and I saw the last of the brothers cut down on the beach when I was searching for them."

Khlit sat down on one of the saddle-bags and pondered.

"Then it is clear that we must bear the jewels of Urgench to the Muscovite Tsar. We three."

"May the black pest take the Muscovite Tsar!" muttered Ayub, shaking his head. "Nay, there is a devil of sickness in me, sir brothers, my arm is broken—you have only two horses. Ride on and leave me here. I do not wish to go from this place."

KHLIT and Shamaki talked together for a while, and then the Wolf turned to his companions.

"We can not reach the Jaick river in the saddle. If Ostap and his men have been wiped out, the Moslems are on all sides of us."

"They will feel our bite before they cut us down," snarled the Zaporoghian.

"This is what we must do," Khlit responded thoughtfully. "The last of the Donskoi are slain; but their word to the Tsar is still to be made good, their pledge must be redeemed. We must take the jewels to Moscow, because we alone know what befell Demid and our words must clear him of all blame. Can you sail a boat, Ayub?"

The Zaporoghian nodded. He had been born on the shore of the Black Sea, and many were the raids he had made on Turkish craft in the long Cossack skiffs.

"Shamaki will give us food for our horses," Khlit went on. "He will not betray us. But you must go with us, Ayub, because without you we could not make the boat trot forward, nor could we rein it back when it was time to halt."

The Wolf and Kirdy had been bred on the steppes, and even in crossing rivers they had seldom set foot in a vessel. Kirdy, indeed, had the Mongol's dislike of the water.

Ayub paid attention at last, and a fresh notion seemed to strike him, because he assured them that he would handle the boat. Until the stars faded and gray light crept among the dead poplars, they sat almost in silence, grieving for Demid and the brothers who had gone out of the world before them.

IT WAS noon before they pushed the boat through the rushes and wet clay into the water. During the morning Ayub and Kirdy slept in the hut, but Khlit was otherwise occupied. He drove a bargain with Shamaki, taking care to get from the Tatar the things the Cossacks needed, but not so much as to make Shamaki less than well pleased.

In exchange for the two horses and the saddles ornamented with pearls and painted leather cloths, Khlit obtained half of the tribesman's stock of barley, a goatskin for water, a small bow and a half dozen arrows and all the dried meat that Shamaki had salted down and kept soft between his saddle and the skin of his horse.

Then Shamaki explained to the old Cossack the extent of the Blue Sea, which he called the Sea of Crows, and the position of numerous islands within it, where the Tatar *yurtas* or wandering villages to the north of it might be found.

"The Mankats and Kara Kalpaks are thieves without honor; they have no tents except wolfskins—do not go to them. The Kirghiz have round felt tents that are sometimes placed on wagons. Go at once into their *kibitka*, and you will be well treated. But when you have left the limit of their village look carefully on all sides, because when you are no longer their guests they may decide to rob you. *Ahatou, youldash*—farewell, my comrade."

"May your trail be open—may your hunting be good!" growled Khlit.

He watched Shamaki put his packs on the flea-bitten pony and mount the gray stallion. The Tatar was glowing with inward satisfaction; he had run grave risks on Khlit's behalf, but he had been well rewarded. If Khlit had driven a hard bargain with Shamaki the Cossack would have done well to slay the tribesman, or the Tatar might take it into his head to betray them to the Turkomans.

"I go to the mountains of the eagles," muttered Shamaki, "and you, my friend—your path lies over the Sea of the Crows. *Kai*, it is a hard road."

And Khlit knew that the old man was homesick for the high steppes where he could hunt the herds of wild horse and gather cattle and women about him and sit in the smoke of his own fire. Khlit, too, would have liked to go with Shamaki and winter in the Airuk range. He did not relish the thought of returning to Moscow. But there was the treasure, and there was Kirdy. The old Cossack had resolved that Kirdy should win honor among Christians, and now he saw how this might be done.

"Aye, a hard road—in Moscow," he answered and Shamaki clucked understanding, riding off on the splendid stallion with the golden eagle perched on the crupper.

Then Khlit carried the saddle-bags and the articles he had bought down to the place where Ayub had said the skiff was to be found. It was clear to him when he saw it that the fishermen who lived in the hut had run off when the warriors began to come to the edge of the Blue Sea. Fish scales, not altogether dried up, stuck to the sides of the boat, and the rushes in the bottom were still damp.

It was rudely made—some fifteen feet in length, with a mast as long as a lance lying in it, and a rolled-up felt sail, patched and tattered.

He filled the goatskin with water and waited until a fresh breeze began to hum in the rushes before waking the boy and the Zaporoghian. Kirdy eyed the boat with little enthusiasm, and Khlit knew that he would rather have kept to the saddle, be the chance of safety however slight.

"Kirdy," he remarked, "the slain brothers have named you Cossack. You have learned many things. But in a boat you have little wisdom. Now we are going on the blue water, and until we set foot on earth again, Ayub is to give orders in all things."

So the Wolf said, and almost at once he had reason to regret it. But he had seen that Ayub was in a black mood, troubled by sorrow and the devil of illness, and it was impossible for the Zaporoghian to mount a horse and ride it off. It was better to let him have his way unquestioned in the boat than to dispute among themselves as to what should be done.

Ayub glanced at the sky and said promptly that they must push the skiff into the water. After two days of watching from the heights he was certain that there were very few vessels at this end of the Blue Sea—only fishing craft like this—and nothing was more certain than that the desert-bred Turkomans would never venture into a boat. Moreover, the wind served the purpose he had in mind.

So they ran the skiff down the salt-streaked strand until, still hemmed in by, the mesh of tossing green growth, it floated and Ayub climbed in, to thrust with the oar until they came out into the clear water where a slight swell ran. Here he took up the bar of the standard that he had carried down from the hut and lashed it near the top of the mast with rushes. Then he set the small yard of the sail on the pegs below it, and, assisted by Kirdy, stepped the mast in place.

The felt sail flapped around them until Ayub showed the boy how by pulling on the ropes at the corners, the yard could be turned to one side so that the wind filled the square sail. He himself thrust the one oar into a crotch at the stern and steered away from the coast.

Khlit, who was watching for signs of Turkomans, saw that Ayub did not head out into the sea, but laid a course that would take them just clear of the headland that formed one arm of the bay where Ostap and his men had taken refuge.

The wind was freshening gradually and white water showed here and there. Still Ayub kept on, until the rocks of the point were hard on their bow. Khlit saw several riders moving out toward them, but these were lost to sight when they rounded the headland and the half moon of the bay opened out.

Here, on the upper sands, hundreds of the Turkomans were camped. At first they paid no attention to the boat. But when Ayub swung on the oar and the skiff pointed in to the beach they began to shout and run down to the water's edge, having seen the white falcon and the streaming buffalo tails at the masthead.

Still Ayub steered toward the sands, and Kirdy glanced at Khlit. Surely, the boy thought, the Zaporoghian was out of his head with the fever and the gnawing of grief. Ayub's full face was flushed and his teeth gleamed through his heavy mustache.

Alert and restless, Khlit studied his comrade's face, glanced at the shore and the figures of the Moslem warriors that were growing larger each minute.

"Let be!" he growled at Kirdy, and sat back, tugging at his mustache. It was clear to the boy that Khlit did not know what Ayub meant to do, but was not willing to interfere with his plan.

The boat began to turn a little more, and presently they could see even the eyes of the tribesmen and the steel points of the shafts they were fitting to their bows. Then Ayub ordered Kirdy to drop the rope. The skiff veered, and Ayub thrust the oar around until the bow came into the wind.

Seizing the two heavy saddle-bags that Khlit had placed under the stern seat he held them up, and called to Kirdy over his shoulder.

"Tell the sons of jackals what these be!"

Kirdy stood up, laughing, and steadied himself against the mast.

"Look well, O dogs of Urgench. Here is the treasure of thy master, O slaves!"

Not content with this, Ayub fished in a bag until he felt a long rope of pearls and lifted it in his two hands for all the shore to see. A shout of rage proved that the tribesmen had grasped his meaning, and fifty bows were loosed. Some of the arrows hissed into the water near them, and two shafts struck in the skiff. These Kirdy afterward cut out with care and added to their scanty stock. By then Ayub was willing to adjust the sail and head off on a long tack that took them clear of the headlands.

Khlit made no comment except to fill and light his pipe, and by this token the boy knew that he rather approved of Ayub's reckless venture. At least the mocking of the Turkomans seemed to physic Ayub's sickness, because his fever mended that night, although it was many days before the swelling in his arm went down and many more before the bone was sound.

DURING that night, while he lay on his back looking up at the glittering firmament of the stars, Kirdy fell to wondering how they would fare if the wind should cease for several days. They were out of sight of land and the skiff was moving sluggishly over the swell—or so it seemed to Kirdy, who did not know that with the wind over the stern the little vessel was making good speed. He put the question to Ayub, who answered that it was the equinox, the season of storms.

In fact the wind did not fail them, though it proved both fitful and treacherous. Ayub showed Kirdy how to tie the ropes that trimmed the sail, and how to steer at night by the stars, picking out the eye of the Great Bear—as Khlit had so often done at night on the steppe.

The breath of the wind became colder, and Ayub roused himself on the third night to make Kirdy take his *svitza* for covering when he felt the boy shivering at the steering oar.

"God made me like a *medvied*, a mountain bear," he argued. "There is so much fat on my bones that even a saber can not cut to my vitals. Take the coat because I have no need of it. *Ai-a*, many's the time I put it over Demid, the *bogatyr*, when he was asleep in the snow. In shape and in voice you are like him, and you are a master of the sword as he was."

Kirdy sometimes wished that Khlit and Ayub would unpack the saddle-bags and show him the precious stones of the treasure, but they never seemed to think of the bags. Once Ayub put his foot on them and began to sigh.

"What is the good of such things, Kirdy? They are not weapons, they are not food. The Tsar will give the best to his women or put them on his collar or girdle. Then he will shine, it is true. But that will bring him no glory. God alone knows what is the good of a treasure."

"It is in my mind," observed Khlit, who had been listening, "that the Tsar Boris seeks to gain more than a treasure from our venture."

"How, more?" demanded Ayub, but the old Cossack would not say.

On the next day the wind bore them close to a clump of islands—gray and ridged with rock and without vegetation of any kind. Multitudes of birds clouded the rocks and rose with clamorous discord when they drew near.

Ayub took this to be an unfavorable omen and would not try to land on the islands, saying that they would find no water there.

"Yet," Kirdy reminded him, "the omen is not bad. Ravens do not venture far from the land."

"If you are so wise," retorted the Zaporoghian, "tell me where the mainland is."

"It lies over there," Khlit said promptly, pointing to the northwest, and Ayub, who did not know that the old warrior had been told of this by Shamaki, grunted in surprize.

And, as Khlit maintained, the line of a high, rocky coast rose out of the sea. They landed that day on a narrow beach under a sheer cliff, and ran the skiff into a nest of boulders. Removing the mast, they covered the boat as well as they could with stones and the rushes taken from it so that wandering tribesmen would not see it from the heights.

Before this they had removed the millet from the saddle bags and bound up the jewels in two smaller sacks that were, nevertheless, as heavy as two long muskets. Their dwindling stock of food and the goatskin made a third bundle that Khlit took on his shoulders. Kirdy carried the bow and went ahead, seeking a path up the cliff, his feet bound in strips torn from the felt sail. He had made himself a cloak out of the felt, and the remaining portions Khlit put in his pack—for which they had reason to be thankful.

The standard Ayub took on his shoulder and, though he complained of many things before they came out of the dry lands, he would not let the others relieve him of its weight.

"In time, little brother," he laughed at Kirdy, "they will make you a *buntchauk ataman* and you will ride under a standard like this, but that time is not yet."

But once on shore, he was content to have Kirdy take the lead. From what Shamaki had told them they thought they had come to the extreme north of the Blue Sea, and so must be several hundred leagues to the east of the route they had taken to Urgench. It was a gray land, under a gray sky, and already the autumn frost was in the ground. Far to the northwest a range of peaks was visible, with snow on the caps, and they decided to strike toward these mountains where they might expect to find some of the Kirghiz nomads taking shelter with their herds in the valleys.

It was Kirdy who led them to water on the second day, and who waited by the well until he had stalked and brought down with an arrow a strange looking beast, fat and fleet of foot with long ears and the vestige of stripes on its skin. Ayub had never seen such a thing before, but Kirdy assured him it was a *kulan*, a wild ass. They passed many herds of shaggy horses with bloodshot eyes—too timid to be approached within arrow shot. These were the wild horses of the steppe, and Ayub lamented greatly that he must needs walk on his feet with hundreds of ponies keeping him company.

They found at first no trace of men, and this vast plain rising to the snow range, so different from his own fertile steppe, filled him with uneasiness, that did not diminish when Khlit remarked that the roof of the world was not far away on their right hand.

For two weeks they moved over the plain toward the range that seemed to recede before them, and at the end of that time they came upon human beings who had never heard of Muscovite, Cossack or Turkoman.

CHAPTER XVII

THE WHITE WORLD

THE Cossacks had seen no animals—not so much as a marmot diving into its hole—for a whole day, and the leaden sky concealed the near-by mountain range when they climbed a ridge and beheld a line of men and beasts moving on the far slope. They lay down at once on their bellies and watched.

Gray as the cloud-wrack were these new people of the waste land—long gray skirts flapping against their boots, high black hats with turned-up brims bent against the gusts of wind. It was hard to tell men from women—except that the women carried both babies and loads while the men stalked ahead, spears over their arms, leading laden ponies.

"No Kirghiz these," growled Khlit. "Nay, they be *shamanists*, devil worshipers from under the roof of the world. They bow down to fire and the blood that feeds their bodies."

"Well," rumbled Ayub, "they are looking for a place to camp. We can go to them and ask for a place at their fire. A dog would not be turned away at such a time on the steppe."

"This is not the steppe," Khlit answered him and shook his head. "The devil people have pointed teeth, like a wolf's. And you are fat as a mountain bear."

"They know that snow is coming," said Kirdy, who had been sniffing the cold air. "Wait!"

For a while the Cossacks followed the gray caravan, keeping out of sight behind the ridge, and when the tribesmen halted in a blind gully to make a fire Khlit took out the piece of felt that was left from the sail and gave it to Kirdy. Then he sat down with his back to the wind. When the first hailstones rattled around them, Ayub missed Kirdy and the length of gray felt—which he could have used very well just then. As the boy had said, it grew darker and the air became bitterly cold and the hail ceased. Flakes of snow swirled down, at first a flurry and then a driving mass that hid their surroundings from view.

"It is wet and heavy," Khlit pointed out, "and the storm will not last."

Ayub was too uncomfortable to consider this, until a hideous clamor broke out in the direction of the camp, and resolved itself into shouting that came nearer and wandered off into the storm. Hoofs pounded on the frozen earth and a pony trotted up without bridle or bit, ridden by a man who was a shapeless bulk of gray, and headless.

With his mind on devils, Ayub lifted the hilt of his saber, presenting the cross on the pommel to the strange rider and was greatly relieved to see Kirdy's brown face appear when the felt cloth was tossed from his shoulders. The boy had driven up two other ponies and these Khlit had gone to catch.

Kirdy wasted no breath in explanation but Ayub knew that he had stolen up on the tethered horses of the tribesmen in the storm and had set loose others than the three he brought back with him.

And he had made a discovery. The *shamanists* were following an old trail that led toward the mountains—a trail made by people with camels, who carried their packs on long poles trailing behind the animals. These, Khlit said, would be Kirghiz, seeking shelter in the upper valleys.

After making halters out of the leather cords Kirdy had brought back with him, the Cossacks mounted the short-legged, shaggy ponies and set out into the driving snow, resolved to put as much distance between themselves and the devil-worshipers as possible. Only for a short way were they able to follow the trail by the Kirghiz, but the next day was clear and they found themselves fairly at the entrance of a wide basin through which a river wound, under the fir-clad shoulders of the heights that rose in successive ridges to the black granite slopes and the glittering snow caps above the timber line. Here they met animal life again—deer drifting along the river's edge, and hares scurrying through the underbrush.

By the river they came on the *yurta* of the Kirghiz—round-faced, smiling people as plump as the fat-tailed sheep that crowded the fold in the center of the dome-like felt tents.

As a matter of course the Kirghiz killed a sheep in honor of the wanderers. They were grateful for the warning that *shamanists* were not far away on their trail, but were in no great hurry to forsake their comfortable quarters. For days the Cossacks slept by the *yurta* fires, keeping the saddle bags under their heads and the splendid curved saber out of sight.

"Those yonder were jackals," Kirdy explained to Ayub, "and these be sheep that wander where the pastures lie."

He questioned the *atabeg* of the tribe as to the mountain range, and learned no more than that the highest peak—the one that had guided them for the past week—was Airuk, the Mountain of the Eagles. The Kirghiz merely shook their heads at mention of the Jaick and Volga and Muscovy. God had made many rivers flow from these heights, they said, and if such a plain as the Cossack steppe existed, it must be at the end of a long journey from their place.

Kirdy thought that they must keep due west, under the setting sun, and pass through the heart of the mountains. Ayub, who was amazed at the long-haired Bactrians of the tribesmen, and at the size of the towering firs and silver birch that sheltered the valley, believed that they had come out in another quarter of the earth and would never find their way back.

But Khlit merely grinned and went about bargaining with the Kirghiz. He had stripped Ayub of everything of value—a leather girdle ornamented with pearls and scroll-work of gold, a red silk neckcloth that the Zaporoghian prized greatly, and a few silver images of fantastic beasts—unicorns, sea-cows and dog-headed snakes—that he wore about his throat. To these things Khlit added a handful of silver coins he had brought from Moscow, and the three ponies.

He and the *atabeg* negotiated for three days, and when Khlit found that the wife and daughter of the chief coveted the string of silver beasts, he made a good trade. The Cossacks were given three stronger ponies with small quilts for saddles, and three enormous sheepskin *khalats* that reached from chin to ankle and covered the tips of their fingers. Two quivers of arrows were added and enough cheese and barley to last for a long time.

"Look here," Ayub complained when he surveyed the goods they had bought, "let us give them a string of pearls from the saddle bags, and then they will let us have a pair of camels and a *yurta*."

"Nay," Khlit objected, "if we let them see we have jewels hidden they will suspect we have more and will rob us when we leave this place. Besides, we can not take one jewel from the hoard because they are not ours."

"That is so," Ayub agreed. "They are the ransom of the Donskoi."

"We need nothing more," put in Kirdy, who had been bred in such country as this. "Game is on every hand, wood is plentiful, and no enemies are on the trail."

"Aye, no enemies but wolves, Tatars and the *ak-buran*, the white blizzard."

"These," muttered Khlit, "are less to be feared than the man who sits in the Kremyl at Moscow."

So they took to saddle again, under the Mountain of the Eagles, and Khlit and Kirdy proved to be in the right, for two months later the three riders drifted in the teeth of a snow storm across the frozen Volga and entered the gate of Kamushink which was unguarded except by a white mound over the sentry box.

When they had stabled their horses they made their way to the house of the commandant, the Swedish Captain Van Elfsberg and, having bowed to him, took their seats on the stove at once, their padded coats steaming and reeking of mutton and horses.

All they would vouchsafe in answer to his questions was that they had come back from Urgench alone, and were ready to be taken to the Tsar. Nor would they speak of the treasure.

THE Swedish Captain Van Elfsberg was accustomed to obey orders without question. The Tsar had instructed him to wait at Kamushink until the Cossacks returned and then to escort them to Moscow and to take charge of whatever spoil they brought back, placing the royal seals upon it.

Van Elfsberg was heartily weary of Kamushink, and decided to set out at once in three sleighs, taking only his orderly and the Tatar drivers. It was impossible to move his two companies over the snow-bound steppe. And, besides, he had only the three wanderers to guard. He did not think that the Cossacks would have journeyed three thousand miles over the desert and the Blue Sea, to run away from him now. As to the treasure that was to ransom them—that was their own affair.

On the second day out he was surprized and displeased to discover that, although the Cossacks had not escaped him, they had run away with him. They had been talking to the Tatar postilions and the sleighs were flying over the white plain toward the southwest instead of to the northwest.

"Eh, Captain," Khlit said indifferently, when Van Elfsberg complained, "all that is true. But tonight we will come to a river, and upon the ice of the river we will make up for these two days."

"What is this river, old man?"

"The Don."

"*Mort de ma vie!* Are you taking me to the villages of the Donskoi? We will have a hard welcome there, after what has happened."

"Nay, we will have a royal welcome."

"But your dark-faced chieftain and all his men—are dead."

"And in the villages of his people the story must be told; the *bandura* players, who are minstrels, must hear of his deeds—aye, and the children of the slain heroes will know of it all."

Van Elfsberg considered this, with some doubt.

"The ——! Can not that wait until you have presented yourselves before the Tsar?"

Khlit shook his head. Before going there the *buntchauk* must be returned to the Cossack elders who had given it to Demid on his setting forth from Kamushink, and—most important of all to the old warrior—the elders of the Donskoi must hear of the deeds of Kirdy. If so, they might give him a Cossack name, by which he would be known to all men.

Meanwhile Ayub had seen the perplexity of the Swede, and leaned forward to clap him on the knee—the three of them were in the first sleigh.

"*Allah birdui, sotnik!* Are we to go into the presence of the Muscovite emperor clad in this fashion with fleas and rags and sheep's grease? They would loose the dogs on us. You, who are an officer, know that we ought to wear the regalia of our rank."

This impressed the punctilious captain rather favorably, and he only asked of Khlit—

"You will certainly appear with me in Moscow?"

He was the more resigned when they entered the first clay huts of a large village, and Khlit led him to quarters in a tavern and, with a word to the Cossack inn-keeper, left him to his own devices. The mead was excellent, the spirits heady and the soup and sausages and little cheese-cakes struck the captain as far superior to the Muscovite fare in Kamushink. He ate heartily, drank, and slept the sleep of a self-possessed man who does not quarrel with circumstances.

During the next day he rather expected to encounter a deal of weeping among the women and angry recrimination from the few warriors and the old men of the *stanitza*. He was aware that riders were coming in continually from the steppe—that candles were carried to the white clay church with the painted door, and that groups of men went from door to door. Apparently Demid's people did not sleep at all that night.

Van Elfsberg was more struck by the fact that his bed had linen sheets as white and soft as those of Sweden, and the hour was late when he rose and went down to breakfast, brushing his tawny mustaches, adjusting his cloak to fall over the tip of his long scabbard and putting his hand on the polished steel sword hilt.

He breakfasted as well as he had dined in a room filled with old Cossacks and young, who wore low Turkish boots and scimitars, who smoked short clay pipes and greeted him with grave courtesy, doffing their caps when he pulled off his plumed hat and bowed.

"*Chlieb sol,*" they said—"Our house is your house."

Although he listened to their talk, he could make out only that they spoke of the *atamans* and a certain Ak-Sokol who appeared to be a stranger in the village.

Once he ventured to address in his broken Russian a youth that he thought he had seen in Kamushink when the Donskoi set into the desert.

"*Eh, batyushka*—it was unlucky, that raid of your regiment."

The young Cossack turned and bowed.

"With the forehead, captain. God gives!" He thought for a moment. "But the jewels are splendid—how they shine! The emeralds are as large as your thumb."

Van Elfsberg checked the cup he was raising to his lips, and frowned. The Cossack was unwilling to say anything more, and the officer observed to himself:

"Well, it is clear that Boris will have to whistle for his treasure, and that won't help my career at the Muscovite court."

If the three Cossacks had brought jewels from Urgench across the border, in their heavy coats or saddle-bags — the ——— knew how—he did not think the court at Moscow would ever see those jewels, and he decided that it would be best for him to say nothing at all about it.

When he walked from the tavern he heard singing in the church, and the women who passed him in the street were not weeping. Their faces were pale and shadows were under their eyes, as if an internal fire had left its ashes visible. Van Elfsberg was glad to find Khlit and his two companions ready for the road. He stopped in his tracks when he saw them.

"The ——!"

Khlit's spare form was clad in a sable *svitka;* his new boots were blackened with tar, and his green sash spotted with it. His *kalpak* was gray lambskin, and he held in his hand an ivory baton, the image of St. George carved in the tip.

"What is that uniform?" Van Elfsberg stopped a passing Cossack to ask.

"That, Captain, is the regalia of a *koshevoi ataman* of the Siech, which is the war encampment of all the Cossacks."

A second glance was necessary to identify Kirdy. His cap was of white lambskin, the top red velvet, his boots were red calfskin, shining with gold varnish. The Swedish captain gasped when he studied the boy's *svitka.* It was pure ermine, girdled with a green sash, wound around and around his slim hips, and embroidered with gold. He, too, held an ivory baton, without ornament.

"And that, your Excellency," said the Donskoi, noticing his glance, "is the regalia of a *buntchauk ataman* of the Don Cossacks. We have just given Ak-Sokol the baton."

Van Elfsberg saw that the splendid head of the boy, thinned by hardships and suffering, was flushed and his black eyes gleamed joyfully.

"But that is Kirdy, the grandson of Khlit," he objected.

"Aye, *sotnik,*" the Cossack at his side nodded good-naturedly. "Yet now he is Ak-Sokol, the White Falcon. It is our custom to give to every man a name, when he has performed some deed. Since he was the last to stand at the side of Demid, our Falcon, and since by his daring the standard of the Donskoi was brought back to us, it is right that we should name him Ak-Sokol. Now he is going to Moscow to tell the Tsar of the deeds of our *ataman* and our brothers."

IN THE chronicles of the reign of Boris Godunov it is related that three masterless Cossacks from the border were summoned to dine with his majesty in the *Terem* one afternoon and there did relate how Urgench was captured.

It was the White Falcon who told the story, stepping into the clear space between the tables, facing the tsar who sat alone, a golden flagon in his hand and a pet gerfalcon on its perch near his shoulder, and the dwarf Kholop crouched at his feet and grimacing. But on either side the tsar were ranged the *kambardniks* with their silver axes, and the eyes of Boris Godunov crept without ceasing from the faces of his chancellors and officers to the throng of the courtiers and ambassadors seated at the lower tables.

He seemed not to listen to the narrative of the boy, yet from time to time he threw at him a keen question, as to the number of caravans in the desert, the strength of the Turkomans and the battle that had endured for a week.

Often he drank from the cup and when he did so the throng in the low dining hall with the carved and gilded wooden rafters rose to its feet, and Kirdy was silent, until Boris Godunov signed for him to continue. And the eyes of the tsar were quick to see who, among his court, were ready to pay him this respect and who lagged in obedience.

But by degrees he hung upon the words of the White Falcon, and even the minstrels who sat against the wall, *teorban* and fiddle in hand, leaned closer, because the story of the battle was one to stir the blood when Kirdy told how each leader of the Cossacks had met his end. When he had done, the tsar sat in thought for a minute and then motioned for one of his *boyars* to fill the gold cup and offer it in turn to the three Cossacks, who bowed to him before they drank and gave thanks after their fashion.

And Boris Godunov drank deep of wine and spirits, because the shadow that lay over Muscovy was mirrored in his broad, lined face, and he had come to his throne by the murder of a boy younger than Kirdy.

"Out of the five hundred, only three returned," he said, looking at Kholop.

"Aye, lord," responded Kirdy.

"It was prophesied that the venture would end in achievement, and also in blood shed," the tsar meditated aloud, recalling the words of Shamaki who had fled from his court.

"Aye, lord."

"Yet you have brought me no treasure."

At this Khlit rose and left the dining hall, coming back almost at once with a slave bearing his two saddle-bags. When he reached Kirdy's side, he cut the lashings and poured out on the tiled floor streams of millet in which glittered many-colored precious stones and clear amber and gray-green jade, and softly resplendent pearls.

Seeking for a moment, he picked out a great emerald and placed it on the table before the tsar.

"Lord Prince," he said, "here be the jewels of Urgench, and the word of the Donskoi is made good."

Boris Godunov scrutinized the emerald between thumb and forefinger without change of expression.

"It is strange," he remarked. "So the matter was foretold—achievement and death have come to pass at the same time. Yet it puzzles me. Your grandson has said that you lacked for money among the Tatars and sold your girdles and neckcloths. Why did you not take one such stone and buy camels and horses?"

"The ransom was not ours. It was gained by Demid and the sir brothers."

"By the apostles—they were dead!"

When Khlit remained silent, the tsar considered them, frowning, and signed to Van Elfsberg, among his officers, to approach. When the captain bowed at his ear, the emperor spoke to him in Latin.

"*Sic itur ad astra*—such is the rise to fame. I did not think these savages would prevail."

The Swedish officer bowed, well pleased at the success of the mission—seeing that Boris Godunov was satisfied.

"These men would not understand," went on the tsar. "I care little for this." He touched the glowing emerald lightly with his plump finger. "The wealth of Muscovy must be gleaned from its trade. A route must be opened for our goods, to Cathay and to India. These men have dealt a blow to the robbers who have hindered the trade of my merchants. *Summum bonum*—that is the true gain."

"The wisdom of your majesty is the blessing of the people."

"But what shall I do with these three? They must be rewarded."

Van Elfsberg pondered a moment, and smiled.

"If your majesty pleases—they would make excellent irregular cavalry."

Boris Godunov was searching with his eyes the heaps of millet, and the facets of the jewels that winked back at the candles on the tables. Of the warriors who served him he knew little and cared less—it was all in the hands of the boyars and the foreign officers. But it occurred to him that men who had brought him such a treasure could be trusted near his person—could guard him from assassins.

"Your services," he assured Khlit and Kirdy who waited patiently before his table, "are such that we offer you posts in this our palace. The youth, although not a boyar's son, may serve as *kambardnik*. The old man may take his place among the minstrels—food and wine will be his as long as he lives."

So said the Tsar to the chancellor who sat nearest, but it was Kirdy who responded, without receiving an invitation to speak. He looked once at the boys who stood, silver pike in white gloved hand, motionless as statues behind the chair of Boris Godunov.

"Great Prince, it was your pledge that we should ride free. Aye, and the villages of the Donskoi should be free. We are little accustomed to a court, and we seek to go our own way."

"Well said," muttered Khlit, under his breath, as he scanned the line of musicians, buffoons and jesters that the dwarf Kholop was mustering in readiness for the entertainment of his master.

"Since you have reminded us of our pledge," said the tsar, frowning, "it is not needful—" he signed to the chancellor.

"The pledge given by the emperor of Muscovy is not to be called into question. You are free to go when and whither you will."

"And yet," pursued Boris Godunov, "the stout warrior appears to desire mead and reward from us. To him we offer a command in the Moscow *strelsui*."

They bowed to the girdle, their scalplocks falling upon their shoulders.

"Nay, lord Prince!" they cried. "'Tis time to go for those who have the road before them."

A thing unheard of at the court of Muscovy—the warriors turned and left the *Terem* before the repast had come to an end.

And the wan afterglow of a winter's sunset found them plying whip and spur as they approached the river gate, where heavily cloaked halberdiers of the *strelsui* shivered and beat their arms to keep warm in the sentry boxes.

Beyond the walls, they reined in to look back at the domes and pinnacles in the dusk, and the White Falcon shook his head.

"It is hard to believe, my brothers. Surely we brought the treasure in our hands to the great prince, and yet—he sought to make me a slave, to hold a silver ax. And he would have set the *koshevoi ataman* of all the Cossacks to eat among the fiddlers."

Khlit glanced at Ayub.

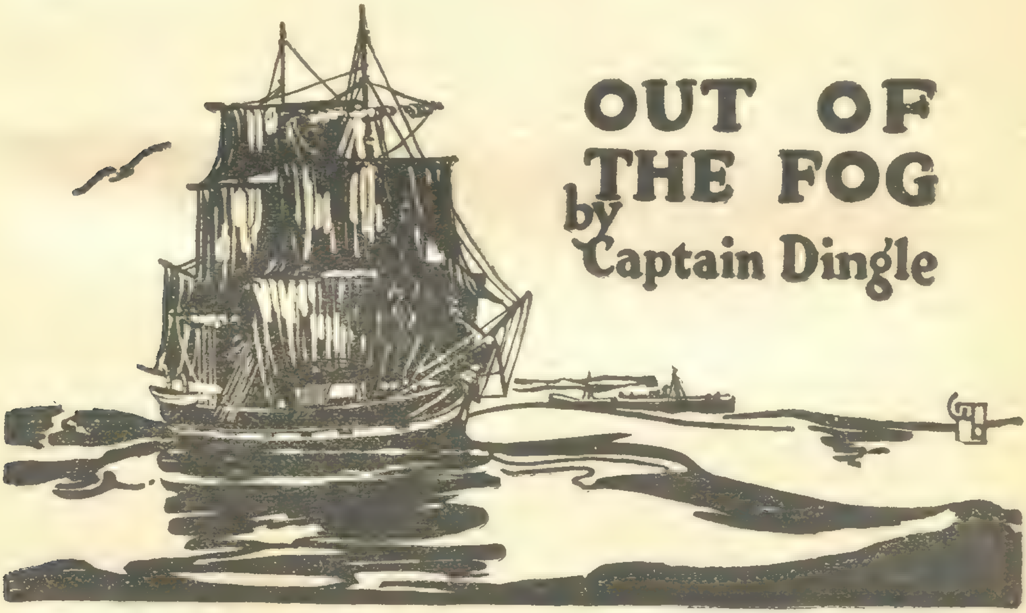
"Eh, he would have made Ayub a sergeant of the town militia."

But the big Zaporoghian had no heart for his wonted laughter, and he had forgotten his feud with the militia.

"The time will come, sir brothers, in the white steppe when I will meet Demid's spirit riding in the breath of the wind. Surely he has not left the steppe forever, and I will listen for the snap of his whip and his call to me. But behind those walls I would not have seen him."

And so the three set their backs on Moscow, spurring forward into the darkness that covered the plain.

THE END



OUT OF THE FOG

by Captain Dingle

Author of "Kelp," "The Knell of the Horn," etc.

THE whaling bark *Gayhead* sat fatly upon the oily sea. Her hull was white with salt and sun, her underbody, as she rolled, showed green and foul with sea grasses. She was deep with an enormous burden of sperm oil, gathered in two years of distant voyaging; her blunt bows pointed homeward, yet the grizzled old heads to be seen above her scarred and bleached rails at intervals wore the air of sore discontent.

Overhead hung a sky as blue and as

unthreatening as the eyes of a baby. The ocean lay glassy to the horizon. It was as if some giant hand had just poured out a caldron of molten glass at the instant when a very gentle earth tremor passed. There was no ripple to mar the surface, but the whole vast shimmering plain heaved and fell to a subtle swell on which the *Gayhead* rolled dizzily.

High in the sky a pair of cruising longtails flashed their yellow tail spikes and almost transparent breasts and wings, through which the sky seemed to gleam. No fish life broke the sea's tranquility. Dotted around the ship, stretching to every point of the skyline, masses of golden Sargasso weed alone relieved the blue glassiness of the breathless ocean.

There was a hush, too, deep and sleepy, except at moments when the old bark rose and staggered on the top of a swell and filled the warm air with the rheumatic groanings of her ancient and laden hull, the hollow rumble of her idle, threadbare sails, the rusty complainings of gear, long past the prime of usefulness. Captain Jethro Scraggs and old Eph Brower, the mate, sat glumly on the skylight under the after house, staring out through the stern opening. Eph smoked an evil pipe which erupted crackling sparks and stank of whale. Jethro's eye, from time to time, flickered from the unpromising sea and fastened upon young Percival up in the crow's nest. Jethro had to crane his wrinkled old neck to catch sight of Percival, but apparently he felt that the hope was worth the effort.

"'Tain't no use gittin' a crick in yer neck gapin' up thar," grumbled Eph, blowing sparks agitatedly. "'Tarnal Fire! Yew kin see es much o' weather signs down here es thet thar young squirt kin up thar, cain't yew? 'Tarnal Fire!"

"Percival's a good lad, Eph, a good lad," returned Cap'n Jethro mildly. "He's larned a lot since that fust trip he took in th' *Gayhead*. Mebbe he'll ketch—"

"Ketch a breeze an' haul it down tew us, I s'pose!" snapped old Eph, waving his pipe and spilling fire broadcast. Jethro got up to stamp out the sparks, making no audible reproof. Old Eph stamped out sparks too, in somewhat chastened mood.

Under the sparse shade of the midship gallows more old men sought relief from the searing heat. The youngest man among them, except for Percival, the third mate, had passed the half century mark long since. Every one of them had done with the sea and with hard labor, when, over five years ago, Jethro summoned them together and all embarked once more upon a cooperative whaling venture in the ancient bark which was to renew every man's dwindling resources, give every man a most welcome sniff of brine again and save Cap'n Jethro's bit of worldly wealth from the maw of shore sharks. And they had prospered. Things had come their way. This was to be the very last cruise, and it had been a good one. The two years had not seemed long, for the whaling had been easy and regular. The weather had been kind. Jethro had so ordered this voyage that the old bark with her old men followed the warm seasons around, never once encountering the bite of winter. Now they were headed for home, with tryworks cold and hatches on. And it had fallen calm. The calm had persisted for many days. The galley garbage hove overboard by Slippy the cook three days before still lay on the glassy sea, that part which had floated.

"Can't see anything up here, unless it's more weed packing in!" Percival hailed from the masthead, and started to come down.

"Thar yew are!" growled Eph. "'Tarnal Fire! Dew we want any young squirt tew tell us wuss 'n we knows? Weed! 'Tarnal Fire!"

Eph stumped off to his stifling little berth. Jethro met Percival at the rigging. Slippy, the cook, emerged from the beef locker and approached them, wearing a long face and waving a hatchet.

"Jethro, I jest broached th' last cask o' beef," said Slippy. "You better git busy an' do something."

WHAT to do was easier to hope for than to advise. There was the ship, full laden, blessed for two years with fine weather, headed for home. There was the smiling sky, blue and benign. There lay and heaved the fatly placid sea, garnished with golden weed, like an ample-bosomed woman dressed in golden lace and blue silk, a little greasy from wear. Nothing was wanting but wind. And wind there was not, nor any sign of it, in the visible universe. Captain Jethro called all hands into meeting to decide upon something for their relief. That was a law of the ancient *Gayhead's* old crew, a part of their contract. Jethro was skipper, Eph Brower was first mate, Jed Roach second, and so on down the roster. And, so long as ship's business demanded it, obedience was given them, but any decision which concerned the welfare of all was made by all. There had been some wordy demur about letting young Percival Furney into the meetings. Percival was only Jethro's stepson, and the spouter's men had plenty of old scores chalked up against the youngster. But Percival had shown signs of making good. Jethro had made him third mate, and he was entitled to a place at the table.

"Slippy ses we must do something," Jethro remarked by way of opening. "Kin anybody say summat as'll bring wind? Stores is low, water too, and—"

"Here we be, dum well gittin' weeded in, and all on 'count o' yewr follerin' the sun instid o' seekin' wind!" blurted out Seth Noakes.

Seth had once been third mate, and resented the advent of Percival.

"Yew all liked th' warm weather," snapped Jethro. "Anyways, yew wuzn't asked yewr opinion of what hes been done, Seth Noakes, but what hes tew be done. Shet up."

"Free an' ekal we be, Jethro, free an' ekal! And yew ain't goin' tew shet me up! Yew fellers—"

"Ef yew don't clap a stopper tew thet thar yapper o' yourn, yew'll miss a meal, Seth," put in Slippy, the cook, banging on the table with his salt horse tormentors. "Weeds is bad and calms is wuss, but here we be, lacking stores and water, and what's Jethro goin' tew do about it?"

"What can he do?" queried young Percival. "He can't bring wind by whistling, can he?"

"Who asked yew tew 'dress th' meetin'?" growled old Eph Brower. His short, black clay pipe sizzled and reeked. "Yewrs ain't the kind o' wind wanted."

Percival laughed indulgently. These old men of the sea had been hard masters while he was learning his lessons in the bitter school of whaling; but he realized now the value of the lessons, and felt grateful enough toward them to ignore their resentment at his youth.

"Without wind, Eph, there's only one thing to be done when water and grub give out," he said.

"Bile salt water and ketch th' steam, and ketch fish, I s'pose!"

"No. Abandon the ship while there's a bit of provisions left, and reach the coast with the boats," stated the young third mate with a quizzical puckering of the eyes, and added, "But Dad won't do that unless he's voted down. Then it'll have to be unanimous, and it's never going to get my vote."

The old whalemen standing around the cabin table swayed to the roll of the bark, their shaggy heads jutting toward Percival, their sunken old eyes glittering at him. Some whiskered jaws mumbled tobacco between toothless gums. Some few separated teeth clicked upon pipestems. There was a rumble of rising indignation as each strove to find words with which to express adequate opinions.

"Be dummed ef I hevn't allus said thet thar young squirt 's half gallied!" roared Noel Pease at last.

"'Bandon ship when thar ain't grub enough tew stay aboard wi'?" yelled Jed Roach.

They glared at Percival, whose grin enraged them. It was Jethro who halted the rising storm.

"Yew ain't gettin' us nowhar," he admonished the gang. "Yew only holler at Perc'val, but yew don't make no ideas yewrselves. Perc'val hes the right idea. Oh, shet up, do!" he bawled as they started to interrupt. Banging on the table with a hard old fist, he told them, "He's right when he ses we could make the coast in the boats. Ain't yew whalemen? It's no more 'n three hundred mile. Thet thar's nawthin' tew whalemen in sound an' tight whaleboats, is it? Yew kin row till yew kin sail, cain't yew? Kin yew do thet thar in this deep laden bark? No, yew cain't. Th' bit o' stores and th' drap o' water es we hev 'ud see us tew hum in th' boats, but likely es not they'll all be finished afore a breeze comes, and—"

"An' lose our ile?"

"Desart th' ol' *Gayhead*?"

"Quit while thar's a mossel o' vittles or a drap o' water left?"

The chorus was noisy and belligerent, but the sense of it was as harmonious as a chant of praise.

"That's my argument," said Jethro. "Perc'val ses he wouldn't vote tew 'bandon ship, nuther. So here we be. I asked yew all tew talk it over, and yew ain't done nothin' yet onless 't is yammer wind es 'ud do more good on deck. Say somethin', somebuddy."

"Go on 'lowance!" snorted Jed Roach.

Jed liked his rations.

"Ef wind comes thar's beef enough tew—" Slippy began.

Old Eph broke in with vast contempt:

"Thar's more wind down here, 'long o' yewr 'ifs' than 'd blow us 'long hum! Thar ain't wind, an' thet thar's the hull matter. Git busy tew fishin', thet's what tew do. And in case fishin' ain't good, hev Slippy sarve nawthin' but hash. Thet 'll make th' beef go further, 'long o' softened hard tack. Thar ain't no call tew yammer about quittin' th' ship, yit awhiles. Sarve hash, an' git tew fishin'."

Old Eph had removed his sputtering pipe to unburden himself of that long speech. He puffed fiercely now until the sparks flew and the rich aroma of whale flavored plug once more filled his nose. Eph possessed the only pair of teeth which met among all the crew, leaving out Percival. Those stubborn old tusks stuck nobly to their duty in holding up his little clay pipe, but he liked to favor them in the matter of food. Hash was kindly food. Moreover, Eph had voiced the ideas of everybody there, even Percival, who was young enough to be attracted by the mystery of it as they were old enough to value the utility.

"Wall, onless somebuddy hes more tew say, we'll hev tew fish, eat hash and wait fer a breeze," said Cap'n Jethro. "Suits me. Only don't git tew grumbling 'mong yewrselves about how things ought tew be. When yew feel es I ought to try the boats, why—"

"Shet up, do, Jethro!" snapped Old Eph, shouldering through to the companionway. "Yew old barnacles, git busy fixin' fish lines whilst me an' Perc'val goes over the side and gits some more barnacles off th' waterline fer bait."

FOR all their noisy grumbling, those ancient mariners of the *Gayhead* were of the proper fiber. They might have vociferated scathing opinions of Jethro Scraggs, his step-son, and his tyranny — so they dubbed his very natural air of command—but let one of their number utter a biting criticism on his own account, when criticisms were not in order, and the rest would swarm over him like gulls over a dead whale and metaphorically rend him to hash.

After the meeting in the cabin they fished. Like silent, broody old crows they sat around the bulwarks, dribbling bits of barnacle in the weedy sea. At first each old man kept to himself, with fisherman's jealousy. Later, when no fish had come to the hook, they paired. When night came, bringing neither fish nor wind, the old whalemen gathered in a mumbling, grumbling party about the tryworks to gather comfort from company.

Roll, roll, roll! The old bark rolled until her bell tolled. She rolled until the sea gushed in through her scupper holes. And the phosphorescence gleamed among the Sargasso weed overside like pallid fire. It was broken by the mad revels of fish, fighting in its mazes for the myriad sea creatures that lived there: snails and shrimps and tiny fish. The weed was dense. It covered most of the visible sea at evening dusk. They could hear it now, caught up in the lazy sheets, the bobstays, the chains, swishing as it was dragged from and plunged back into the sea.

"What use is a thumpin' lay if it never gits hum?" grumbled Amos, thinking of a little cottage with flowers and cabbages that he had set his eyes on. "We might all on us die an' drift among this yer weed for ever an' ever, amen."

"Thar's a million fish a-scrappin' in the weed, but nary a one bit on my hook," muttered Noel Pease. "And who wants tew eat hash fer brekfus, dinner, an' supper fer ever? Slippy don't make hash like—"

"Yew never et real grub before yew shipped wi' me!" cried Slippy. He and Noel were old antagonists. "Yew hollers before yew're hurted. Yew're th' weepin' willer es told Jethro yew couldn't chew salt hoss becus yew heerd es I give him a mess o' canned tripe what I found stowed away in a locker frum two year ago. Thought yew 'd come in for a whack, yew did. A bit ago yew wuz hollerin' loudest about what yew wuz goin' tew do when yew got hum. Now yew want tew 'bandon ship an' throw away a forchun in ile an' ambergrease, all on 'count o' yewr belly as can't stand hash three times a day. Yew're windy, yew are. But at that yewr wind don't do us no good. Yew're jest a whiff o' bad breath."

Many of Noel's old cronies shared his ideas, but Slippy rather shamed them into silence. They had, all of them, looked forward to the end of this voyage. All of them were long past the period when hard toil nourishes. They had returned to the sea, and to whaling, after several years of retirement, and had made good amazingly. But they were tired. They longed for the rest, and the peace of a comfortable home again, and they had earned enough to assure it. When they shared out this full trip, every man of them would be in easy circumstances. Even if they lost this trip they would not be destitute, nor would they be compelled to go to sea again. But if they stayed out there among the thickening weed until the stores and water utterly failed—

"How about a little harmony, my bold sailormen?" cried Percival, breaking in upon the gloomy circle and strumming inharmoniously on an old frying-pan banjo.

Percival knew he might expect a cool welcome. Those ancients had accepted him, both because of Jethro and because they had to admit the youngster had a lot of good in him which was coming to the surface since his remaking, which was largely due to their forceful teaching on previous voyages. But he was still the "young squirt" to them, and they were of one mind in resenting his assumption of equality with them who were so mellow in experience. But a cool reception had never frightened Percival. He whanged out a few crashing discords, and led off with the whaler's own song:

"Oh, a ship was all rigged and ready for sea,
And all of her sailors was fishes to be."

The singer paused very slightly, waiting for some response. None came, and he carried out the refrain himself:

"Windy weather, pleasant weather,
Fair winds blow us home together."

"Fair winds!" shouted Seth Noakes, stumbling to his feet and leaning threateningly over Percival. "Yew etarnal young gallywampus! Ef yew comes a-mockin' yewr betters wi' yewr fair wind guff I'll—I'll tarn yew into fritters an' fry 'em in thet thar dumblasted banjo!"

"Ain't yew got no sense at all, Perc'val?" chided Slippy, the cook, gently. "Ef yew could raise a fair wind, now, wi' yewr singin'. But yew can't, me son."

"Th' young feller's doin' a dumblasted sight better at that than th' rest o' yew," put in Old Eph Brower from the after darkness. "'Tarnal Fire! Ain't it better tew sing than tew sulk? Yew carry on wi' yewr singin', Perc'val."

Percival grinned and plunked away on his banjo. But he sang no more of fair winds, since the subject was a sore one to the becalmed mariners. He struck off into another ditty.

'Twas in the month of February, while in the southern seas,
We anchored on a coral reef, waiting for a breeze.
The captain he was down below, and the crew were dodging about,
When suddenly we heard a splash, and then a terrible shout.
Singing—Blow the wintry breezes, blow the winds heigh-ho!"

So far there was no response. Rather there was a darker resentment than before. But those greybeards contained a sense of humor deep down under their crusty shells, and as Percival paused again, ever so slightly, midway of the refrain, there was a dry cackle of laughter in the gloom and a weirdly unmusical but lusty chorus finished the stanza:

"Clear away th' mornin' dew, an' blow my bully boys blow!"

BUT there came a time when even Percival's singing failed to arouse any response. Days wound their blazing course across a brazen sky. Sargasso weed covered the sea from rim to rim. Weeks grew out of days, and old men grew hollow-eyed and ashen.

"Yew ought tew 'bandon ship 'fore we starve, Jethro!" one or another would say.

"When yew all vote for it," Jethro would retort.

"Don't give up the ship!" sang out Percival at those moments, and he always had at hand a pilot chart of the North Atlantic which he would unfold before the rheumy eyes of the weakening whalemen.

"How many days of calm have we had? Count 'em up. See here. Already we've had more than the average for this time of year. Can't be many more. We'll have wind, and then you'll be glad you had guts enough to hang on."

The fish would not bite.

"Too much food for them in the weed," Percival explained.

It never rained.

"When a squall does come, though, it'll fill the tanks in five minutes!" Percival said with conviction.

"That thar young squirt's growed up intew purty much of a man, ain't he?" grumbled old Eph, giving grudging credit, and Cap'n Jethro rejoined reflectively:

"If 't wuzn't fer him, I dunno but I might vote tew 'bandon ship myself, Eph. His lay from this yer v'yage wuz tew set him up in a good chandlery business, but this yer ca'm—Hob's boots! 'Tain't nat'ral."

"This yer lay wuz tew do purty much fer all on us, Jethro," said Eph, blowing a furious cloud of smoke up into the windless air. "'Tarnal Fire! Even th' fish won't bite. An' Slippy sez—"

"Slippy kin speak fer hisself, Eph Brower. Thar's grub, yet," burst forth from Slippy, beneath the open skylight. "'Tain't Slippy who'll vote tew 'bandon ship."

ONE day Cap'n Jethro caught sight of a dark break in the monotonous gold of the weedy sea. He was getting nervous, for the crew had relapsed into ominous silence. They did not even grumble. Jed Roach had put his boot through the banjo in a dark moment after Percival had sung through to the bitter end "I'll Go No More A-Roving!" Percival still sang, but there was less spirit in his singing. Jethro clambered up on the skids with his spy-glass and focused upon the distant speck.

Of late the Sargasso weed had been mixed with heavier growth, of loose kelp and broad-leaved bottom plants. Bits of driftwood, too, and old men might begin to imagine all manner of things in the *Gayhead's* predicament. Every one of the old spouter's crew had heard weird tales of the Sargasso Sea. They had been whalemen when such tales were believed implicitly by every sailor afloat. They all knew how ridiculous such stories were, because all had sailed through that part of the ocean a score of times. Yet they might be impressionable still. The sight, for instance, of a sheer hulk drifting. Jethro felt a bit uneasy himself as he slowly swung his glass to pick up that dark break in the weed. He got it, and in a moment his lusty bellow brought out the old men running.

"Steamer ahoy! Eph! Jed! Perc'val! Here's a steamer. Git out th' signal flags and make up a h'ist asking fer provisions. Git a move on yew. She ain't going tew cruise around in this yer weed no longer'n she kin help."

From rails and skids and rigging the old whalemen peered against the sun glare. There was a steamer, sure enough. She steamed slowly, as if low-powered and hampered by the weed. But she grew to the sight, and her smoke was something to cheer a sailor. In the dead air the *Gayhead's* signals hung flaccid and indistinguishable, until Percival swarmed aloft and fastened a stick along the fly edges of the flags and made them stand out flat against the blue sky.

"Is she alterin' course, Eph? D'yew guess she sees us?" muttered Jethro.

The steamer stood clear in every line and color like a picture plastered against a yellow and blue background. But she gave no sign that she saw the old spouter.

"Yew might es well give her th' urgent signal fust es last," grumbled Eph, his old pipe drooping from between the only two teeth that met, and crackling with the fierce heat maintained in its charred bowl.

"Send up the N. C., Jed!" Jethro ordered. "Haul down that other h'ist. No use askin' for provisions. Tell him we're in distress, and need assistance. What d'yew make her out tew be, Eph? Furriner?"

"She ain't flyin' no flag." Eph glowered after the steamer, which was slowly passing on, five miles away. "That sort don't. But I'd know her again, in a thousand. Dumblast her b'ilers! Look at her go! Her wi' her fo'mast set right on the focsle, and her stinkin' smoke pipe stuck right over th' cabin! 'Tarnal Fire! She's passing by th' N. C. es sure es yew're born, Jethro!"

"Stick out thet thar signal straighter, Perc'val!" bellowed Cap'n Jethro. "She cain't see it plain, maybe. Stick it out, lad!"

The steamer passed on, while twenty-four silent old men stared incredulously after her.

"Thar she goes, dumblast her!" swore Jed Roach, slamming his greasy old cap to the deck and grinding it under heel. "Hope she sinks!"

"She passed by the N. C.!" stammered Jethro.

"Yew can't mistake her, nuther," shouted old Eph, shaking a knobby fist after the offender. "Thet thar fo'mast, and thet thar smoke stack! We 'll make her name stink, yit!"

"Aye, ef we ever gits hum!" muttered Amos, bowed and broken.

"Don't give up the ship, lads!" cried Percival cheerily. Jethro tried to compass a smile, but it was watery and wavering. "There will be other steamers," Percival went on. "And you old whales ought to know that there's rain and wind back of that eastern sky!"

Every aged head turned to the east. Then every dim eye turned upon Percival. In the eyes of Jethro, and, less spontaneously, of old Eph, thankful approbation gleamed; but in the eyes of no other, for the eastern sky held no promise of wind or rain. If anything, the golden weed that prisoned the bark was packed thicker in that direction than in any other.

"Thet thar's a dumblasted bit o' fancy!" grumbled Eph, tamping down the tobacco in his pipe and setting it alight afresh.

"Aye, and bless th' lad for it!" rejoined Jethro, earnestly.

That night the old whalemen themselves demanded a meeting, and the abandonment of the *Gayhead* came up again, this time with almost unanimous support. Jethro sat silent. The idea of leaving his cherished old ship to die out there in the weed choked him. He fixed his gaze upon Percival, hoping for—he didn't know what.

"But I tell you there'll be a change!" Percival insisted.

"Aye, when every mossel o' vittles is et!" retorted Seth Rowe.

"Yew an' yewr changes!" growled Noel Pease. "Who set yew up tew be a weather shark?" Noel grew hot. "Why, 't want but a baby's breath ago es Eph spanked yewr pants good atop of a sparm whale's carkiss!"

"Thet thar yammerin' don't help us none, Noel Pease, so shet up!" snapped Jethro.

He wanted to back the youngster. He hated to think of quitting. But there really was no sign of any weather change, and he knew Percival was putting up a brave bluff, which might not stand against such growing surliness as Noel Pease had acquired.

"Sence yew don't 'pear tew hev no mind o' yewr own—"

"Who sez we ain't?" demanded Amos, who wanted to go home.

"— I say let's give Perc'val's weather ontil tomorrer noon tew show up. Then ef thar ain't no change, we'll git up an' git out."

"'Tain't so dumblasted sartain es we'll be able tew shove a boat through the weed by tomorrer," grumbled Seth Rowe.

"And another day's rations'll be et wi'out gittin' us nowhere," Amos muttered.

Old Eph Brower thumped the table and bellowed into the gloomy faces:

"'Tarnal Fire! Yew old barnacles ought tew be in a old men's hum, 'stid o' whaling! One v'yage yew grumbled 'cause 't was cold. Now yew growl because 't is warm and sunshiny. Yew ought tew be 'shamed tew look thet thar young feller in the face. Yew'll take yewr lay smart enough arter yew bring the ship hum all on 'count o' Perc'val's believin' in Jethro's luck. 'Tarnal Fire!"

EARLY the next morning a rain squall made up out of the east, and Percival wore a perky air as the old men rigged water catches to secure the precious fresh water. The wind that brought it down upon the whaleship was so fresh, so blusterous, that Jethro yelled out to square the yards to it.

"Come, bullies, stamp an' go!" yelled Percival, flinging down the gear and catching hold of the main brace. "Here's your wind!"

"Ting-a-ling-ling for the Virgin Mary,
Ting-a-ling-ling for the Virgin Mary,
Square main-yard Johnny Angletairey
Early in the morning!"

And, amazingly, there was a response as the yards swung round.

"Hooraw, up she rises! Hooraw, up she rises!
Hooraw, up she rises early in the morning!"

"Three cheers for the Bedford lasses,
Three cheers for the Bedford lasses—"

The wind died as suddenly as it had come, and the rain roared down as straight as lances, making steam and thunder of ship and weedy sea.

"When th' wind's afore th' rain,
Soon 'twill die to ca'm again!"

Eph Brower roared disgustedly as he bade the hands 'vast hauling.

"Leave them braces. Git tew ketchin' th' fresh water. That's summat es is sure, anyhow."

NOON came. There was no more wind. The ship and the sea and the sky remained as if painted there in eternal pigment.

"Wall? What do yew all say?" asked Jethro when the jangle of eight bells died on the dead air.

"Oh, they won't quit!" cried Percival. "There's water to last a month now! And where there's one squall there'll be others. Why, there's one now!"

Percival sprang up on the rail and stood on the skids. He had no hope of squalls, but he did hope to gain time before the dismal idea of abandonment was carried into effect.

"Thet thar young squirt is lyin' ag'in," stated Amos sullenly. "Thar ain't no squalls in thet thar sky, an' wall yew knows it, Jethro Scraggs! I votes tew—"

"Look! Look yonder!" yelled Percival.

And they saw him capering at the main rigging, arm outflung, pointing away to where the golden weed seemed divided into a lane of blue, as if by some subtle current. They peered, too, for any break in that deadly weed was devoutly to be hoped for. There was no wind, or sign of wind; but in that blue lane rolled and lazily spouted a glossy black bulk that every old whaleman recognized.

"Blo-o-ow! Sparm, tew! Blo-o-ow!" the murmur swelled, and life came into listless men, though none rightly knew why, since the ship was full.

"There's beef for us, bullies!" yelled Percival, and they knew the source of their sudden interest at once.

"Ain't no boat goin' tew git through that weed," Amos complained.

He had been eager to try for the coast with a boat not long before.

"Sure we can get through!" shouted Percival. "Shall we lower, Dad? There's meat rolling loose out there."

"Ef yew do yew kin try yewr luck yewrself," growled Jed Roach with a nod of understanding at Amos.

"That's the stuff," grinned Percival, still looking to Jethro for orders.

The old whalemen gazed thoughtfully at the distant cachalot, rolling lazily over and over in the blue lane, tossing heaps of golden Sargasso weed broadcast whenever his flippers swept from the water. Even those men who had been most insistent on attempting the boat trip now doubted that any boat rowed by men could traverse that deadening barrier. Jethro doubted it. Old Eph doubted it. But good red beef lies beneath the blubber of a sperm whale, and good red beef meant all the difference between holding on to or letting go of a fortune, since rain had given them water.

"Lower away one boat, and yew try yewr luck es Jed says, Perc'val," Jethro ordered. "Now then, yew whalemen. Them as is tew old kin stop aboard. Four o' yew men es kin pull an oar git intew thet thar boat."

Four old men fought through four times four to get into that boat, and Percival tried to hide the grin that stole over his cheery face as he caught Jethro's whimsical eye. Then the boat pulled away, her ancient oarsmen making a manful effort to share their youthful coxswain's ardor. They tried to join in his swinging song, but somehow their oars refused to swing with the tune.

"Terbacker, oh, terbacker, oh, th' whaler loves terbacker, oh,
So airly in th' mornin' th' whaler loves his 'backer oh.
Th' bottle, oh, th' bottle, oh, th' whaler loves th' bottle oh,
So airly in th' mornin' th' whaler loves his bottle oh."

Cap'n Jethro and old Eph Brower watched them from the boat skids. They saw the courageous old seadogs struggle against weariness and weed. They heard the hoarse old voices quaver forth the swinging song and gradually lose rythm. The boat scarcely moved. Oars dipped and came up loaded with a dragging burden. But in that first splendid enthusiasm of young Percival the boat made progress, slow as it was, and the weed closed behind it. Percival's voice soon carried the song alone. He was seen to change places with a tiring oarsman, and carry on still singing. He changed again, when the new steersman was rested, letting another old man rest at the steering oar. Soon after that his voice could no longer be heard from the bark; but every man could still see him as he gentled and encouraged his beaten crew to carry on. The whale lay like a half-tide rock with the weedy water laving it, rising and falling as if under the urge of a subtle swell not yet generally apparent.

"Seems es if th' weed hes shet in 'round thet thar whale," said Eph. "Mebbe they 'll git fast tew him. 'Tarnal Fire! D'yew see that, Jethro?"

Jethro had been peering across the weed to the eastward where the yellow surface was heaving slowly and where a dozen threadlike blue streaks opened through the mass.

"What?" he asked, turning.

He picked up the now distant boat.

"Hob's boots! Is thet thar whale sounded?" he stammered.

"Sunk like a dipsey lead!" grunted Eph. "Now stand by tew hear summat when them old barnacles gits aboard wi'out their beef! What d'yew s'pose they'll hev tew say tew Perc'val?"

"If the east'ard sky ain't lyin', Eph, thar's a breeze comin'. Mebbe thet'll pacify 'em."

But the breeze was slow in coming. It was there, certainly, but shy. The chief hope lay in the fact that the weed was almost imperceptibly moving, and breaking up into patches. There was a strong swell under it, too, which began to roll the *Gayhead* giddily. The same swell passed out beyond the motionless boat, tossing it among the breaking masses of golden fetters.

Those on the bark saw the boat slowly turn under the impulse of Percival's lone oar. It headed shipward, but scarcely moved. It was not hard to imagine the condition of those old men, beaten in body and spirit, kept going by the sheer obstinacy of young Percival Furney who was a bad memory to most of them.

"Brace the yards for port tack, Eph," said Cap'n Jethro, turning from watching them with troubled eyes. "Soon es thar's a mossel of wind we'll stand down toward 'em. Mebbe we won't need thet thar whale meat arter all. 'Tis a fair wind is coming."

"Aye, what thar is of it!" snorted Eph, driving sulky old men to the braces.

The weed-trammelled sea heaved more steeply, but the wind did not come. The boat battled desperately but almost hopelessly, twisting and backing among the slowly moving heaps of tangled stems, seeking blue lanes which closed tantalizingly as soon as they were made. At dusk, the *Gayhead's* sails swelled to a gentle air no harsher than a sigh, and the helmsman tried the wheel for the first time in many days. It was too soon for the ship to answer. The barely filled sails could not yet move her through the heavy entanglement, and until she moved she would not steer.

"Never mind," Jethro said. "Try her as she gets the breeze. And Eph, yew hev a lantern ready tew hang in the riggin'."

Darkness came, and the breeze blew fresh from the east. The old bark turned her blunt bows against the weed and steered toward the point where the boat was last seen. The wind strengthened, and the weed was torn apart. After an hour, a thin voice called out of the night, and the bark turned toward it, backing her mainyards and coming to pause.

"Heave us a line!" Percival shouted, and he sounded half strangled.

"Cain't yew pull 'longside?" thundered old Eph irritably.

"We 're hanging on to a busted boat!" came the answer.

The whale had come up under the boat, and even those old men, to whom whaling was second nature, could not save their craft from capsizing. And the whale's flukes, in sportive salute, converted the boat into scattered planks as he sank again to seek another egress from the weed.

The crew were half drowned and wholly beaten. The men who had remained on board looked after them. Jethro issued generous rations of his scanty store of rum. And Percival, once he realized that the bark was speeding homeward before a fair wind, recovered his cheery optimism and laughed at the hard things that were said of him.

There were some of the old whalemen who knew how much they owed to young Furney's sanguine spirit. But they reasoned that it was bad policy to overpraise youth. Those who refused to see good in Percival were so elated over the swift progress of the *Gayhead* toward home that they ignored the young third mate as they ignored the food shortage. Slippy's hash tasted good, although it lacked onions and was utterly dependent upon whale oil for frying grease.

So for two full days the *Gayhead* flew. Buoyant as a cork, for all her lading of oil, she tossed the miles astern and flirted saucily with the colder seas near the coast.

"Make land tomorrer," remarked Jethro, coming up beside Percival after pricking off his noon position.

"I'm glad the old chaps'll save their lay," grinned Percival. "They're getting old, Dad. They never said things about that steamer that gave us the go-by like they said to me about the stove boat. It's time they got home."

"They're purty old men tew be whalin', Perc'val. Purty old," said Cap'n Jethro quietly. "But they're purty good old men, too. We been together a long spell, lad."

"Oh, I don't mind 'em," retorted Percival. "They taught me all I know that's worth while. I'm only sorry I didn't get the beef for them, that's all."

"Don't yew worry about thar beef. Hash won't hurt 'em for a day or so longer."

AT MIDNIGHT the wind fell light. At eight bells in the middle watch, it died, and a light fog drifted athwart the stars. When daylight should have come, the fog was like a gray shroud, and out of it came the sounds of groping shipping.

"Jest a breath o' wind, now, and hum we go," said Jethro hopefully. Jed Roach had taken a sounding, and showed the arming of the lead. The *Gayhead* was very near home.

But no wind came that day. Nor the next. Every few hours some great steamer would sound her warning out of the gray invisibility, hear the croak of the whaler's pump-horn, and pass on indifferent to the fog. But there was no power to give the *Gayhead* motion. The old men lost the vitality that had supported them during the past two days. The chilly fog seeped to their bones. Slippy's hash was an abomination.

"Ef we don't git in tomorrer, yew won't hev tew eat no more of it," Slippy told them grimly. "Sopped hard tack'll be good for a change."

Percival started them fishing. Remembering their experience in the Sargasso weed, they cursed him gently and left him to fish. He caught a small cod, and interest grew. Other lines whizzed over the rail, into the sea which was audible though but vaguely visible. It gurgled at the chainplates, and the square stern sat flatly into it at times. Great strings of cobwebby fog-beads began to grow in the rigging. But fish had been caught. Slippy was already greasing his frying pan. Fire crackled in the stove.

"Keep thet thar foghorn goin'," said Jethro, sniffing the appetizing reek from the galley. "Don't forgit thar's steamers a-stormin' through this yer fog. Hear anything, Eph?"

Eph sucked at a cold pipe. His grizzled old head was thrust forward. His brows were drawn with puzzlement.

"I heard thet last toot, but nawthin' sence. Seems es if thar's some'at movin' out thar, though."

Jethro listened. There was the cold flopping of another captured cod on the decks in the fog, and a toothless cackle of childish boast.

"Bring in yewr fish, m' lads!" yelled Slippy. "Who 's fust for a fried cod?"

"Shet up!" cried Jethro, irritably.

He was hearing something not concerning fish.

"'Tarnal Fire!" roared Eph suddenly, and gripped the skipper's arm. "Look thar! Look out fer yewrselves, fellers!"

The fog swirled. And out of it crept a black, lean shape. A tall, sharp stem rose up above the gaping whalemen, and in an instant crashed into the *Gayhead's* side. The old bark reeled. Her startled old men clawed for support, staring up at the monster. A few voices came from somewhere behind the tall stem, cursing the sailing ship in harsh gutturals. There was the grumble of reversing machinery, and slowly the stem backed away. The *Gayhead* came upright again.

"Hey, yew've cut us down!" yelped Amos, shaking a futile fist.

"Git out the boats, and shet up!" roared old Eph. "'Tarnal Fire! Look at thet thar fo'mast, stuck right on th' fo'cs'le! And—" the steamer turned broadside, the fog drifted less densely for a moment— "look at thet thar smoke stack! 'Tarnal Fire!"

"Shet up and git busy!" roared Cap'n Jethro.

He was already peering over the side at the gaping wound left by the steel stem. Jed Roach was fumbling overhead under the skids, trying to drag out a harpoon while keeping his eye on the dissolving shape of the steamer, swearing horribly.

"She's leavin' us tew drown!" gasped Amos.

"Yew won't drown!" retorted Percival. "Drown? With three good whaleboats handy? Lend a hand here, old man. You're a long way from dead yet."

"Try the pumps, Eph," bawled Jethro. "Here's a breath of air, stirring. Mebbe she'll float on the ile. Try her."

"Thar's summat goin' on aboard thet thar pirut steamer," said Eph.

There were sounds. Cries and curses. Then a siren boomed out a desperate note as if the cord had been tied. A few shrieks of long disused tackles sounded, and a confusion of voices.

"Tryin' tew git boats over. She must ha' hurted herself!" decided Eph.

"Help! Help!" pealed through the thinning fog.

The air grew to a breeze, and the *Gayhead's* sails filled. A gang of old men worked at the midship pump, and water gushed out. The bark moved forward.

"Yew go tew ——, yew all-fired pirut!" screamed Amos, shaking his fist at the cries for help. "Yew left us tew starve and yew cut us down an' left us again! Go tew——!"

"Will she float, Dad?" asked Percival anxiously, holding on to his boat falls when the boat was almost at the water.

The cries out there in the fog were silenced for a moment, and there was a sobbing roar of escaping air and steam. Then men's cries broke out anew—cries of men in the water, struggling for life.

"Yew go an' git them critters," said Jethro, grimly. "Our boats'll float ef th' *Gayhead* don't, an' we cain't leave feller critters tew drownd, Percival. Yew go ahead."

"Let 'em drownd!" grumbled the old men toiling at the pumps.

"Save 'em and make 'em pump," suggested Jethro, satisfied that he could carry the bark home if the breeze held fair and not too fresh.

Percival was already unhooking the tackles, waiting for a crew. The thought of pumping the ship home and the possibility of having somebody do it for them, sent men tumbling into the boat. Another boat was manned and lowered too, for the pumping was no joke. It was not certain that the bark would stay afloat, either. It was just a hope.

It was a dismal gang of queer seamen that the whalemen dragged out of the ocean. The change that came over them the moment they stood on the deck of the *Gayhead* was astonishing. They seemed to feel safe at once, though the gushing water from the pump-lip was no evidence of security. The *Gayhead's* men received them ungraciously, making room for them at the pump handles, which the rescued men refused to accept. A big, hairy man who appeared to have authority, carrying a dripping oil-skin package under his arm and guarding it tenderly, drew Jethro aside as soon as he decided who was skipper. What he said did not reach beyond Jethro's ear, but Jethro's answer did.

"Thar ain't no passengers nor no price, Mister! Yew cut us down, but yew wuzn't tough enough tew sink an old spouter full of ile casks bung full. Thar ain't no grub in this ship, an' mebbe we'll sink afore we git her hum. But yew kin pump yewr passage."

The hairy man bent down and muttered something into Jethro's ear again.

"Yew'll go intew our hum port," said Jethro. "Ef yew don't like thet thar, yew kin git back intew the water."

The old bark sailed sluggishly, but she had not far to go when the fog cleared and the breeze blew true. Men pumped; some sang, some swore; but all pumped.

"Mizzouri she's a mighty river,
Awa-ay, yew rollin' river!"

The whalemen sang, led by Percival. The steamer's men swore, needing no leaders. That night the shore lights winked welcome. Jethro came on deck, hearing loud cries. Two boats were gone, and old Eph was smoking unconcernedly at the port rail.

"Yew let 'em take our boats?" stammered Jethro. Eph grinned and started his old pipe to crackling.

"Yew'll hear 'em comin' back in a minit," he said. "I lifted out th' plugs."

"What d'yew s'pose thet thar steamer wuz, Eph?"

"Dunno. Some sort o' pirut, though. They offered tew buy them two boats—"

"Hey! Throw us a line. We're sinking!" yelped a terrified voice. Two boats splashed frantically toward the bark, and the old men threw lines to them. Then a gang of threatening men stormed over the rails and advanced upon Jethro. Noel Pease and Jed Roach silently thrust forward the murderous blades of two harpoons, and other old men reached to the racks for weapons. The steamer's men fell back. Obedient to an order, they clambered down into the steerage, under the main hatch, and cursed from that place of comparative safety while the gurgling of the water among the casks in the hold gave them food for thought.

THE *Gayhead* swam slowly into her home harbor with the port doctor's boat alongside and, at the doctor's suggestion, the police flag flying. So she came to rest alongside an old, weedy wharf where the water was not deep enough for her to sink. And while the customs men rummaged her perfunctorily and ancient whalemen dressed up to go ashore, Cap'n Jethro, Eph Brower, Percival, and Slippy, the cook, sat around the table in the cabin and gammed earnestly.

"Some sort o' smuggling, they steamer fellers hed been up tew," said Slippy, vaguely. "Dope or somethin'. The police told me thet's a vessel they've been arter for a long time. Knowed her es soon es I 'scribed her. Mebbe a bit o' reward, too. Never knows—"

"Never mind rewards, Slippy. What d'yew figger tew do wi' yewr lay? Perc'val's all fixed up thet he wants tew hev a store."

"I'm going to see about it now," said Percival, clapping on a hat and stepping into the companionway.

"Wall, how about us?" proceeded Jethro. He settled back in his chair, lit a cigar, and gave a tilt to his cap.

"Yew knows my mind," said Eph. "Lay th' *Gayhead* up soon's she's unloaded, right at the end o' this wharf where she lay afore. She's all th' hum I want, Jethro."

"You, Slippy?"

"I don't want no Snug Harbor! I been happy here."

"Then us three'll stay by th' ship, an' if any o' the others ever wants tew sniff whale for a while, thar's room fer 'em all. We kin all live aft, snug an' handy."

Three old men sat wreathed in smoke, buried in memories and dreams. The pumps clanked, but a hired shore gang did the work, and soon the cargo would be going out. It was a rich old interior they sat in. At a previous date a bit of left-over pink paint had been slapped around the mast. It was smoky and faded, but it gleamed still through the foggy reek of tobacco like a pleasant weather cloudlet through storm wrack.

"Hev tew clean her up an' paint her, I s'pose," mumbled Eph.

He had been a good mate, and good mates have their minds ever upon their work.

"M-m-m-m!" grunted Jethro.

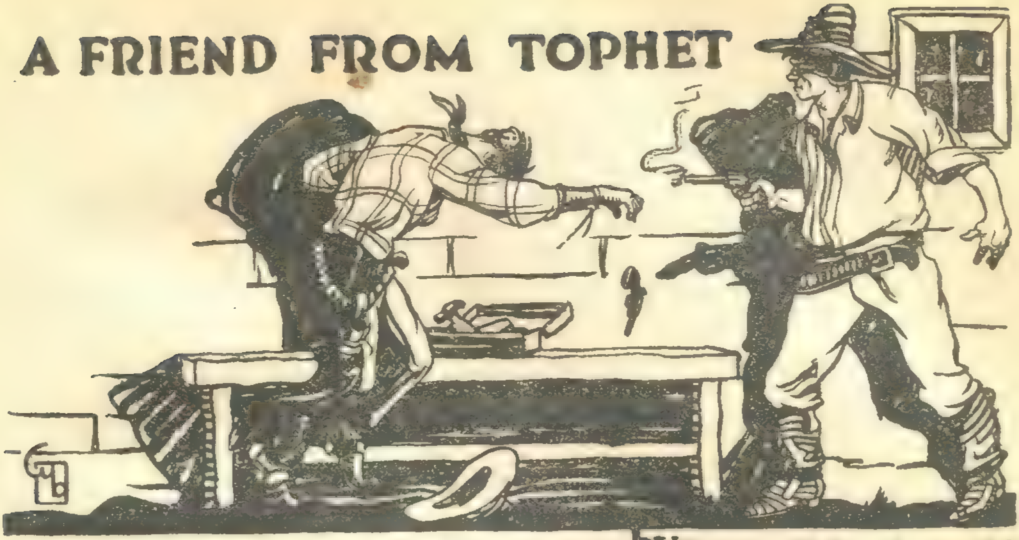
He was far off in a land of dreamy ease.

"Cain't yew never drap work?" grumbled Slippy, the cook.

"How about white wi' blue panels?" persevered Eph. Jethro's cigar dropped from his relaxed lips, and he sighed blissfully as his eyes closed.

"Pink, Eph. Paint 'er pink!" he whispered, and Slippy's rich-toned snore joined his in emphasis of the momentous decision.

A FRIEND FROM TOPHET



A Complete Novelette by E·S·Pladwell

Author of "Power," "The Gila Kid," etc.

A WAGON drawn by two elderly bay horses rumbled along a road of parallel wheel-ruts in the sage, greasewood and prickly brush which covered a dry little mountain valley.

A red dog of setter tendencies trotted at the left of the horses and collected mental notes concerning jack-rabbits, coyotes, deer and snakes which once had ventured near the road. They were not there now. The laden wagon could be heard for half a mile, and above this grumble was the lusty baritone vocalism of a cheerful blond fellow in blue overalls and shirt and high boots who strode at the right of the team:

> "Around her neck
> She wore a yellow ribbon.
> She wore it for her lover
> Who was far, far away.
> Far away—far away—"

The road turned a curve, straightened on a tangent and stopped.

There was no terminal, no detour, no anything. The road just quit. It ended at a deep and wide depression, as if some mighty hand had taken the land from under the road and churned it into a geological hash made of stones and streaky earth, garnished by mangled bushes and the roots of several trees.

The traveler walked to the edge of it. His whimsical blue eyes squinted toward a clear sky and then to hills at his right, where the nearest cañon looked as if some hose had washed away its dirt and scrub pines, leaving a thousand-acre gash. Most of that cañon, he noted, had traveled down in a hurry. Some of it was in front of him, scattered in streaky heaps which smelled of moisture. He thought he saw puddles.

"Seems hard to believe that so much cloudburst could happen in so short a time," he remarked to his dog. "Why, it's only two days since we came across this country, and it was flat as a board. Now look at it!"

But the man's eyes sought a route across the desolation. Ex-cloudbursts were irritations, but there were ways to navigate them with luck, and so finally he mounted the wagon, gripped the reins, detoured to the left, descended a gentle slope where the banks had fallen away, flanked a pine tree standing upside down, climbed a small Matterhorn of rubble, crossed a valley of smooth, wet brown sand, and swung toward a jungle of brush which had impaled itself upon a barrier of trees running parallel to his course.

The dog started off like a red streak toward the barrier, barking wildly. The puzzled driver halted his wagon.

A faint human cry came from the wilderness.

The driver leaped from his seat, stumbled across a rocky acre, shouldered into the deep brush and followed his baying dog into a deeper thicket where something white loomed ahead.

It was a wagon with a canvas top, lying on its side, almost buried in a tangle of wet weeds and rubble. Under it was damp sand and in among the wreckage was a gaunt man, lying with his body pinioned near a hind wheel.

The man was still alive. The whiteness of his face emphasized the blackness of his eyebrows and droopy, long mustache. His eyes were dark and sad. His bald head glinted in the sunlight like the small end of an egg, flanked by enormous ears.

He glared up at his rescuer.

"You ain't gonna get me! Somebody'll come along—"

The man's gaze became more sober.

"Oh. Take this wagon off me. Where's the kids?"

"Kids?"

The newcomer looked about. From around the end of the wrecked vehicle appeared two small blue-eyed urchins in dirty white, scarcely old enough to walk. One started to bawl. The other followed suit. But the newcomer searched for a heavy pole to pry up the wagon. He found one and started to work.

"Your kids?" he demanded.

"Nope."

"How long have you been here?"

"Since yesterday."

"What? Pinned here? No grub, no water?"

"I can move my right arm. Canteen, see? My left's broke."

The newcomer raised the wagon and made it slide sidewise, uncovering the man except for his boots. The wagon's prisoner relaxed and closed his eyes; but he was still able to talk, though faintly.

"Who are you?"

"Larry McCall. Who are you?"

"Ben Jackson. Watch out for yourself!"

A FIGURE moved in the rubble behind Larry McCall. Larry swung around to see a big, bearded man approach, holding a pistol. To Larry's surprize, the other man pointed the six-shooter straight toward him.

"Get out of this!" roared the new arrival. "What are you hornin' in for?"

"Horning in?" Larry's round red face looked amazed. "Why, can't you see he's been pinned under the wagon?"

"Yeh? Well, he's gonna stay pinned under the wagon!"

Larry stared at the man as if loath to believe it. The fellow was burly, with shoulders like an ox. His face was knobby, brutal and low of wit. It was clear that he had decided a course toward the wagon's victim and was not able to change it at short notice.

"That man done me wrong," he snarled, in explanation. "You think I'm gonna let you git him out and go on with his crooked work? Na-a! I ain't been watchin' him since the cloudburst, I ain't chased him across three counties just to have some fool like you horn in! No, sir! He's through!"

"Are you crazy?" gasped Larry.

"No, I ain't crazy. I'm only a plain ordinary man that's been swindled out of my place with the gang. Swindled out of my share, sent packin', kicked out. He shot my brother. Let him suffer. I'll finish this, mister. I want to talk to him first. I talked to him this morning. I've got a few more things to say to him. You keep out of this. Git along!"

Larry was stumped. There were many rough, tough characters in Nevada and some were fine specimens of sodden brutality, but this fellow, with his one-track mind bent on torture, was hard to accept. He had intimated that the man under the wagon was no angel; the word "gang" had a sinister sound; but Larry was forced to strive for him. There was no other course.

And then the babies. They were wailing with piteous insistence, keeping their little mouths wide open while tears rained down the grime on their cheeks. Plainly they were hungry and quite weak.

"How about those kids?" demanded Larry.

"Hang the kids! Take 'em!"

"They're not mine. Whose are they?"

The bearded man pointed down the valley.

"Over yonder is the woman that owned 'em. She was drownded. The hosses are over near her. They're all dead. The kids belonged to her!"

"But where is her man?"

"I dunno. Mebbe he went down-stream. Say, I ain't goin' to argue all day. Are you goin' to git out of here or do I have to handle you?"

Larry—he noted that the man's eyes were narrow and bloodshot and dangerous—

walked very slowly to the scared babies while noting over his shoulder that the bearded fellow had turned to the prone man and started jeering while holding the pistol in his direction.

Larry's right hand flashed to a rock as large as a big cake of soap.

He swung around, whipped back his arm and hurled the rock. It winged straight to the back of the man's neck.

The fellow with the pistol collapsed.

"Good shot!" gasped the wagon's prisoner.

"Well, I couldn't let him kill you," snapped Larry, coming up. "Who is he?"

But the melancholy man closed his eyes again.

Larry took the pistol from under the bearded giant, examined a growing lump at the back of his neck and thrust him aside until the wagon was heaved up again to release the imprisoned man's boots.

The bearded fellow began to regain consciousness. He sat up, rubbed his eyes, and stared around like a foolish bear. Then his stupid gaze went to Larry.

"Did you do that?" he demanded.

"Sure. I had to. You'd have made him suffer too much."

"Yeh, I'd have made him suffer, stranger, and now mebbe I'll 'tend to you. Gimme that six-gun."

The astonishment in Larry's eyes gave way to amusement.

"You're not safe," he decided.

The giant swayed to his feet and stood glaring.

"You mean, you're goin' to take his part?" he roared.

Larry, holding the pistol, started to laugh at the man's stubborn refusal to notice plain facts. The giant's face reddened. He clenched his fists and began to sway forward like an angry bear. But Larry was standing at bay, and the flicker of his laughing eyes advised the big fellow not to advance too far. The giant swayed back.

"You'll pay for this!" he snarled in baffled irritation. "I'll git you, too. Some other time you and me's goin' to meet. Hear that?"

"I hear it," acknowledged Larry. "And now what?"

"Never mind what! You'll learn later!"

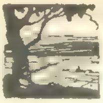
And so the sullen giant with the one-track brain lurched over the rocks toward a gray horse tied to a tree-branch. Larry followed lest there be a rifle on the man's saddle, but there was none. The giant mounted, cast a malignant look at Larry and the wagon and then departed. The dog gave him a volley of defiant barks till the horseman was far away.

Larry stretched blankets for Jackson in his own wagon and managed to haul him up there. The children were fed. Larry explored the ruined wagon, searching for information. Everything had been washed overboard. He sought the woman and shortly found her, lying face downward in sand, where he forced himself to look for a locket or something to identify her. The poor yellow-haired woman in cheap and faded calico was only a mute mystery, expressionless and colorless in death as she must have been in life. He gave her a quick burial and searched around some more, but his only reward was a dead horse in some brush.

"That cloudburst," he decided, "must have caught these people right in its path and rolled 'em under. But how did Jackson and the babies get there?"

Jackson was asleep on the wagon. The babies were starting to whimper. Larry, bewildered by his new troubles, bundled the youngsters at last into his wagon and then, with a sigh, he took the seat and started his howling hospital-nursery on the broken road toward home.

II



IT IS no slight task to nurse a sick man and two discordant babes along fifty miles of rough road, and Larry endured a journey so rife with demoniac events that the victim's original cheeriness was changed to despair.

At last the wagon descended into an oak grove, bounded by a muddy little stream. He stopped his horses and nudged the sick man alongside him.

"We've arrived!"

The bald passenger looked around at the camp in the shady trees. Westward across the stream was a long sagebrush prairie, backed by bare, gray mountains. Eastward, behind the camp, was a great slope covered by oaks and brush, and behind this the land rose upward for countless miles to craggy bare peaks where the sun of late afternoon painted copper and orange and yellow.

"I like those colors," said Larry whimsically. "They remind you of the story books. See that square spire with the copper and gold? It's where Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves might hang out."

Jackson's mournful eyes estimated the peak.

"Couldn't forty thieves get up there," he drawled. "Couldn't even one thief. Too steep."

There was nothing more to say.

Larry hauled his passengers out of the wagon, unloaded supplies from a distant lumber mill, built two cots, padded them with leaves, attended his horses, cooked supper at dusk on a stove made of earth and a flat piece of iron, and served it to his guests in the beds under the oak trees, with a tarpaulin spread out for a sun-shade. Jackson, with his arm in a rude sling, was in fairly good condition, but the youngsters were not.

"What am I going to do with 'em?" groaned Larry.

"I dunno."

"But who do they belong to?"

"That woman."

"Yes, but who was she?"

"I dunno."

Conversation dragged. Larry noticed that his chatter bogged down with this gaunt man with the eggshell head and the high cheek bones and long mustache. There was something sad about him, as if he were afflicted with ingrowing thoughts. There had been mention of a shooting and a gang, so Larry decided to try for information:

"What's this gang your friend was talking about?"

Jackson's moody eyes stared without resentment.

"Ain't none."

"How about that shooting?" persisted Larry.

"His brother tried to shoot me. I shot him."

"Where?"

"In the head."

"I mean whereabouts?"

"Back yonder."

Larry tried another track.

"Well, tell me about this cloudburst. Were you in the wagon?"

"No. They were ahead of me."

"Friends of yours?"

"No."

"Well, what happened?"

"The storm hit us."

Larry, watching the man with his mournful mustache and his sad eyes in hollow sockets, wondered if there was any great intelligence under that smooth rounded skull. He persisted—

"Well, what happened?"

"It came all at once."

"What then?"

"We went downstream."

"You were mounted?"

"Yeh."

"What happened then?"

"Horses kicked away from the wagon. It rolled over. The woman and the man fell out. Drownded."

"What were you doing?"

"Swimmin'."

"What were the babies doing?"

"Yellin'."

"Did they stay in the wagon?"

"Yeh."

"How is it they didn't drown?"

"They were in a packin' box."

"What happened then?"

"I lost my horse. I started to wade towards the wagon."

"How far?"

"Quarter of a mile."

"How deep was it?"

"Knees. Boot tops. Ankles. Soles."

"The water rushed away quickly, then."

"Yeh."

"What then?"

"I went to the wagon. I walked along the side. Dirt caved in. Wagon caught me. Busted my arm on a rock."

"And you laid there all night?"

"Yeh."

"Who was the big, bearded fellow who found you?"

"Dave Bender."

"What does he do?"

"Nothin'."

"Where did he come from?"

"Over yonder."

Larry stood up and stretched. The moon was beginning to shine among the oak trees and the plain, and the children bawled again. But Larry forgot these things in his irritation at the gentle but grudging stranger. And then Larry grew ashamed of his wrath at a sick man. He reached down and patted Jackson's shoulder.

"It's all right, old sport. We'll go to town tomorrow and see a doctor—babies and all. He'll fix you up in a jiffy."

"What will you do with the kids?"

"Maybe I'll get a woman to keep 'em."

"Who?"

It was Larry's time to be silent. Most of the women were dance-hall girls and the like.

"I guess I'll have to keep the kids," he faltered.

"All right. Bring the doctor. I'll stay here."

"All alone?"

"Sure. Got grub, got water. The trip's too long for me. Bring the doctor."

Larry agreed. Next morning he saddled one of his horses and prepared to start for town, first giving Jackson his breakfast. Jackson was livelier.

"All this your ranch?" inquired Jackson.

"I hope so."

"Livin' alone here?"

"Yes."

"Where you from?"

"Illinois."

"What are you aimin' to do?"

"Settle here."

Larry found his tongue loosening. Perhaps he was weary of the eternal question-and-answer conversation or perhaps he found himself with an audience for the first time, even though it was a melancholy audience.

"I'm young yet," argued Larry. "I'm only twenty-seven. I found this place three months ago. I want to keep it. I'll have a house about here. Up yonder a ditch will bring water along the curve of the hill. I want a truck-garden and a peach-orchard. There'll be grapes down near the stream. Down lower here, maybe, I'll have a few cattle. Give me about ten years and I'll have the finest little place in the country!"

"Huh," observed the depressing guest. "Costs money."

"Oh, I make a little doing carpenter work in town. I'm willing to battle for this place. This is my place!"

"Huh," grunted the guest.

Larry mounted his horse quickly lest he lose his self-control. Shortly he was far down the plain, loping along on the forty-mile path toward the little town beyond the southern shoulder of the range of gray mountains.

He rode on and on. The day passed. Dusk came.

He flanked the range of mountains and saw the lights of the town ahead, over the tops of sagebrush, relieved by a few trees. The moon came out and Larry reached a main road. He passed the first house and barn. He turned a curve and came to a grove of trees and another house where dogs barked. The road turned again, straight into the main street.

Noises assailed his ears from up ahead—yells and shots. Curious, he spurred his horse toward a distant livery stable with a dim lamp in its door.

Seven armed men stepped out from behind a shed and barred his path. The moon glinted on the barrels of their guns. Larry reined in.

"Git off that hoss!" ordered a gruff voice.

"What for?" demanded Larry.

"Because, mister, you're under arrest!"

III

LARRY soon found that he had run into a patrol of irate citizens who had formed themselves into a vigilance committee. The cause was easy to see.

The town was built around a plaza, begun as a park and then allowed to lapse into sagebrush again, and around this fenceless square were clusters of shadowy frame buildings, often with wide gaps between them. The fifth frame building at the left up Larry's street, the largest of the lot by far, was erupting with gunfire.

For some distance around this dark but explosive building there was a wide space consisting of a dirt street and a flat plaza where the moonlight showed no trace of any living thing except one broncho tied to a hitching-rack which he was trying vainly to pull backward. Three dead horses lay near him.

On both sides of the belligerent edifice there were figures in doorways, trying to take pot-shots at the main building's defenders. Across the plaza were long distance efforts by entrenched battlers attempting to send lead through the front windows. From the other sides of the square came the sounds of similar endeavors, where militant persons were shooting slantwise into the beleaguered walls, and presumably there were still others at the rear, bathing the place with more lead.

"What's it all about?" wondered Larry, dismounting.

"They tried to hold up the Gold Ledge dance-hall. They got caught," explained a townsman. "Friends of yours, mebbe, eh?"

"Why me?"

"We ain't takin' any chances, mister. They ain't the whole gang. They said there was more of 'em. Come out of the road. Let's see you."

Larry followed his captors to the side of the street, sheltered by the walls of a frame building where knots of citizens and women and a few children stood and listened to the sounds of strife up ahead. Larry's guardian wheeled upon him.

"Now," said the spokesman, "who are you and what are you doin' here?"

"I'm Larry McCall. Haven't I got any friends in town?"

He saw an acquaintance whose face came under the light of a near-by door-lamp.

"Hey, Bill—take this vigilance committee off me!"

Bill arrived. There was a palaver. Larry was released and the vigilance committee returned on duty to catch other hapless wanderers. Larry stayed with the crowd in the darker shadows and peered down the street. Bill, a mustached fellow-carpenter, remained with him.

"What happened?" demanded Larry.

"Oh, a fool crowd started to hold up the dance-hall. They got inside and whooped around and shot off pistols and robbed the safe and tried to make a quick getaway. But somebody began to shoot at 'em, and they popped back into the dance-hall, and there they are. It's been goin' on for half an hour. Gettin' sorter hot inside. Hear that? There goes the glass chandelier!"

There was a loud tinkling crash.

"But what's this about more of 'em coming?" inquired Larry.

"I dunno. Bluff, mebbe. One of 'em yelled, 'This ain't all of us' when they first ran into the dance-hall. Somebody remembered it, so the town folks organized and now there's a big passel of 'em watchin' the roads where it's safe. You'd be surprized."

"I was," admitted Larry.

A passionate burst of gunfire came from the beleaguered building. The opposing fusillade increased in volume, testifying that the townsmen were being reinforced on all sides.

"I wish they'd stop it," said a woman at Larry's left.

She spoke to nobody in particular, but he was nearest.

"It'll stop soon, ma'am," he assured her. "Nobody could hold that building much longer."

"They ought to surrender," came her low voice, this time to Larry.

"They will," he prophesied.

A hard elbow poked into his ribs. A heavy man leaned on him, forcing him back a step and then following him up. The intruder snarled:

"Get out of here! Nobody asked you to horn in! I'm takin' care of Miss Fitzgerald. I don't need any help, see?"

Larry writhed out from the elbow.

"Well," he remonstrated, "you don't have to get so excited about it!"

"What's that?"

Larry saw he was outweighed about sixty pounds but the man's officiousness nettled him.

"I said you didn't have to get so fresh about it," he repeated.

Slap! The big man's open hand whipped into his face.

"I'm not taking any slack from you!" roared the larger man. "Now, get out of here!"

Larry's sense of outrage caused him to make a savage swing at the face which loomed above him. It was an action born of sudden mad irritation, and it landed with such a satisfying crack that the big fellow reeled backward, staggered, flopped up his arms and swayed for a moment to regain his balance, while the bystanders forgot the explosions up the street and turned to watch the new entertainment.

AND then the cyclone came upon Larry.

There was a silent bull-like rush, a swinging of powerful arms, and *bang-bang-bang*—the victim felt sledge-hammers smashing into his eyes, nose, ears and mouth until his world rocked and constellations of sparks danced before his eyes. He tried to ward off the shattering fists. A blow knocked his arm aside, another sent him off balance and the earth leaped upward to receive him.

"When I'm protectin' a lady," bawled the big fellow to the world in general, "I don't expect to take any jaw! See?"

There was no reply. But Larry, sitting up and rubbing his tingling face, felt that the man's protectiveness was overdone.

"Well," admitted Larry as Bill dragged him to his feet, "when you're protecting a lady, I'll say one thing—she won't have much chance to meet any white men!"

"What's that?" bellowed the big fellow in disbelief at such impudence.

Bill dumped Larry to the ground again. The girl interposed.

"Please!" she commanded. "This is no time for fighting."

"All right," agreed her escort. "I was just teachin' this man a lesson."

"What about?" she inquired politely.

"Why, he was gettin' fresh, wasn't he? I had to protect you, didn't I?"

"No."

The protector opened his mouth and stood irresolute, and then he fell back on stubbornness.

"Well, I had to," he assured her. "That fellow's a bad *hombre*."

The bad *hombre* was back on his feet again.

"All right," he challenged, "you know so much about me. Who am I?"

The big man, taken aback, let his jaw sag and then his little eyes showed a glare so malevolent that it was plainly apparent even in the dim light from the moon and from the windows of back-street houses. Bill laughed. So did the girl.

"All right," confessed the big fellow very slowly, "you got me that time. I don't know who are you, but I'm goin' to find out. Then you'd better travel!"

The man's voice was cold and level. He was about to say more but a yell came from up the street and than a growing cheer of victory which swept around the plaza. Larry noted that the firing had ceased. The crowd started to surge ahead, gathering slow momentum. The big fellow and the girl were caught in its tide, drawing away from Larry and Bill.

"Who was that?" inquired Larry.

"That's Henry Kronberg. He's a big cattle owner. Got a range up north on the plain. You want to look out for him!"

"When did he come to town?"

"Oh, a few days ago. He's been hangin' around Bessie Fitzgerald—like a lot of others."

"Who's she?"

"Dunno. She came last week to visit her aunt, Mrs. Tucker, who died last month. Bessie didn't have barely enough money to go home, so she went to work in the Southwestern Restaurant."

"Pretty?"

"Fairly," qualified Bill.

They walked toward the plaza, a great moonlit square surrounded by dark houses with shafts of light appearing in the windows. Larry found himself swept toward Kronberg by the crowd, which passed a saloon whose broad doors and windows sent bright illumination upon everybody. Larry peered at Kronberg's face with its small eyes, broad cheeks, aquiline nose, heavy jowls and double chin.

"Hog," decided Larry. "You can't whip it. You've got to kill it."

Bill laughed at the change of tone.

"Scared?" he bantered.

"Yes," admitted Larry. "You can't argue with that!"

"Huh! How do you know so much?"

"I don't know," admitted Larry, trying to study it out. "It's a hunch. There's something porky about him. I hit a hog with a fence-rail one time. It didn't do any good—he went on eating. You've got to kill 'em. I don't want to kill anybody."

"Huh! You're a funny son of a gun!" remarked Bill.

The crowd stopped some distance away from the porch steps of the big dance-hall, whose entrance was cluttered with glass. A dozen men with rifles were aligned in front of the building, facing four others who stood on the porch and held their hands up. One of them bore a rag around his head; another had a bandaged arm; otherwise the hail of bullets seemed to have reached no human mark.

THE four culprits stepped off the porch and into the moonlight in front of the lone horse. Two men wearing stars approached them and searched for weapons while the line of riflemen kept guard. One of the officials was the grizzled old town constable.

"Seems like you started somethin' you couldn't finish," observed the constable. "Who are you? Where'd you come from?"

Silence.

"You don't belong around here!"

Silence.

"Are there any more of you?" roared the constable.

Silence.

"Aw, string 'em up!" bellowed some one in the mob.

The crowd began to growl and jabber. Larry noticed that they swayed as if getting ready to go forward.

The constable held up his hand. The jabbering continued. The constable mounted a step and two riflemen joined him. The gleaming barrels had a sobering effect.

"There ain't goin' to be anybody lynched," announced the constable. "You durned fools! Haven't these fellers given you a good evenin's entertainment? Ain't you got any sportin' blood?"

Somebody laughed. Everybody took it up. The crisis was past.

The prisoners swung into line and led the way to the calaboose. The riflemen strode behind them. The crowd, a holiday procession in the moonlight, marched gaily past the plaza and down to a little side-street to a two-room edifice with barred windows. Old Doctor King, an irascible gentleman with a frock coat and long black whiskers, was summoned inside the jail. Larry waited till he emerged.

"I've got a man with a broken arm and a fever," he announced.

"I've got twenty of 'em. Where's yours?"

"Over at Oak Tree Creek. You could get there tomorrow if you started early in the morning."

"Huh!" pondered the doctor.

"I've got two babies," pleaded Larry. "They're about two years old. I don't know what to do with 'em."

The doctor glared.

"I found 'em in the hills," appealed Larry. "They're sick."

"Where are their parents?"

"Dead."

"H'm. What are you feeding them?"

"Beans, crackers, coffee and canned tomatoes. It's all I've got."

The doctor examined Larry for some time.

"I think I'll go with you tomorrow," decided the medico. "Otherwise you'd be lynched for murdering children!"

Next morning Larry prepared for the journey quite early. He spread the news about finding the children, hoping that relatives might materialize somewhere, and took breakfast at the Southwestern Restaurant. The quiet girl gave him a nod and a smile. She was a pleasant, good-sized young woman with light brown hair and hazel eyes.

"You're face is healing quite nicely," she observed.

"It didn't hurt much."

"It shouldn't have happened at all."

He looked out of the streaky window. Into his line of vision walked Henry Kronberg, the big porky-faced cattleman, and alongside him was a great, sullen, hairy fellow in a ragged, blue jean outfit, whom Larry had last seen after the cloudburst. Both men were across the street.

"Who's that whiskered fellow?" demanded Larry.

The girl looked over his shoulder.

"I never saw him before," she admitted.

Larry wasted time, hoping that the men across the street would move on; but they settled down to a long chat. He was forced to go out of the front doorway. The bearded fellow saw him and waved an arm.

"Hey! Where's that crooked friend of yours?"

Larry replied courteously enough.

"Oh, he's out in the country, I guess."

The man came forward, meeting Larry in the middle of the street as Kronberg laughed and walked away.

"Oh, you guess, do you? You sneakin' liar, you know all about him!"

FOR the second time Larry was confronted by heavy odds which sought battle. This man was not a pig but a shambling bear with ferocious little reddish eyes and a one-track brain. The blond young fellow felt weary and hopeless; not because he was frightened, but because he realized that he had collided with another of those specimens which couldn't be subdued except with a crowbar, an ax or a volley of lead. Reason, logic, justice or courtesy had nothing to do with it.

But Larry had to elect himself for slaughter. There are certain fighting words which no man can ignore. "Liar" is one of them. He knew that the word was overheard by four loafers sitting on the edge of the board walk, as well as three loafers on tilted chairs at the near-by general store; consequently, it was up to Larry to step forward and deliver a blow.

He did it fervently. He landed directly between the eyes of the bearded fellow and caused him to emit a grunt. And then Larry's expectations proved correct.

The giant swung both his long arms from the hips, hammering downward as if his arms were clubs. One smashed down upon Larry's guard and knocked it away. The other crashed on his shoulder and nearly broke it. The snarling bearded giant wrapped a hand around Larry's throat and bent his head back, and then slammed down with a fist which numbed his face from forehead to chin.

"Stop that!" rasped a voice.

The giant turned his hairy face while holding the wobbly Larry for another blow. The giant bared his teeth. The irascible voice repeated its command:

"Stop that! Let that man alone! Hold your dog fight some other time! That young fellow's coming with me."

"Gr-r-r-r-r!" raged the giant.

The doctor turned to the loungers at the store:

"Get this gorilla out of here! My time's valuable!"

Surprizingly, they obeyed.

Perhaps they knew that the bearded old *medico* in the spotted frock coat had more business on his mind than all of them put together, or perhaps they owed him money for overdue bills or gratitude for mended bones. They scrambled down from the porch. Three of them reached for guns at their hips and one took his chair with him.

The bearded giant observed all this and let go of Larry's throat very swiftly and shambled down the street. He had seen arguments that he could understand.

"All right," snapped Larry's rescuer. "Now come on. If you must fight, why don't you pick reasonable odds?"

Larry grinned, in spite of the red welt on his forehead.

"I don't pick them, they pick me."

"Well, then, get a shotgun."

"Maybe I'll have to!"

They went to the livery stable, got their horses, and started on the long ride toward Oak Tree Creek. The doctor's saddle-bags bulged with mush, rice and condensed milk.

"Now, tell me about your babies," he demanded.

Larry told him the whole story.

"You ought to bring them into town," decided the medico. "Let a woman care for them."

"Who?"

"Yes, who?" admitted the doctor sadly.

At dusk the travelers reached the stream and the line of oaks. The red dog bounded out and gave loud welcome, but the others were in bad shape. The babies were hungry and whimpering. Jackson lay with his left arm swollen and his face pale. The doctor glanced at him but went to the babes. Larry stayed with Jackson to await orders.

"Did anything — happen — in town?" gasped Jackson.

Surprized, Larry pondered on this, and then he gave a short report. Jackson closed his eyes. His Adam's apple worked up and down his scrawny neck.

"The fools!" he exploded. "They went off at half cock and now—they're in—jail and they can—stay there!"

IV

LARRY quizzed his melancholy friend again ten days later. Jackson's arm was doing nicely in a sling, and he had managed to mobilize the wriggling babies at a lunchtable under an oak tree beside the stream. Larry came in from plowing a field.

"How about this gang?" he asked point blank as he sat down.

The man of mystery examined an ant on his plate.

"Ain't none."

"Well," insisted Larry, "there must have been one. You've been pretty rough in your day, haven't you?"

"Whatever I done I've paid for."

"Oh. Reform?"

"Nope. Broken arm. Private troubles. Forget it. Let it lay."

Larry was compelled to change the subject. He watched one of the babes as the awkward Jackson mixed its ration of grain and canned milk. Larry blurted:

"I wish we could find their relatives. I asked the doctor to search. I wonder what their names are?"

"Dunno."

"Their father might have survived."

"He's drownded."

"Well, they'll have to have names," repeated Larry.

"Sure."

Larry exploded:

"Say, what makes you so darned indifferent? You found 'em first. You've got to take some responsibility!"

"Me? No, sir! What would I do with 'em?"

"Well, what am I supposed to do?"

"Keep 'em. Mebbe you'll git attached to 'em."

Larry clenched his helpless fists. The calm, monotonous demurrers of his rawboned guest, with his sad and listless voice, made Larry's sweet temper sustain an attack of exasperation.

"You've got to take half the responsibility!" he roared.

"Nope," disagreed Jackson without resentment. "Can't do it. You've got a place here. I'm a travelin' gent."

A low wail was organizing from both youngsters. Larry gulped.

"Well," he pleaded, "what shall we name 'em?"

"Suit yourself."

"All right. Elizabeth and Jim."

"Fair enough."

Larry arose from the table wildly.

"Here. Let me feed 'em. You'll start 'em bawling again."

"Go ahead."

Larry leaned down to the table. He happened to look under a low bough, toward the great plain to the westward. A column of gray-brown dust arose like a smoke-cloud beyond the clumps of greenish sage where a red mass of moving objects could be seen in the haze of their own making.

"Cattle!" exclaimed Larry. "They're coming to water!"

The reddish forms advanced over the sagebrush. Riders appeared with their enormous brown leather leg-coverings flapping up and down with the leaping motion of their horses. A leader rode ahead of them. He materialized alongside the stream, a tall and black-mustached man who wore dusty gray store clothes and long boots and a wide-brimmed hat tied by a strap under his chin. He bawled—

"You campin' here or takin' the land?"

"Taking it," answered Larry.

"Huh. You ain't aimin' to grab all that water, are you?"

Larry made the best of the situation.

"No. Help yourself. Keep your cattle below our camp, will you? We've got a hospital here."

"Shore!" agreed the cattleman, heartily. "I got a thousand head. My name's Hampton. Tom Hampton. We'll be neighbors, mebbe."

"How long?" wondered Larry.

"I dunno. A long time, mebbe. It's a bad year. The next stream's eighty mile away. My wells are all dried up. We'll draw our boundaries anywhere you say."

Larry pointed down-stream toward flat lands where the waters lost themselves in a fetid salt-grass sink.

"You'll find an oak stump about five hundred yards down yonder. There's plenty of good land between there and the sink. Go to it."

The rider waved a friendly hand and went back to his work. Larry watched the rowdy punchers on the flanks of the oncoming herd, weaving in and out, waving their hats, jumping over brush, swinging the slow mass southward to the landmark. The air was filled with fine dust. The sunshine in the oak trees became shafts of radiance coming straight down between the boughs, like lances.

"I don't like this," confessed Larry to Jackson. "We'd better put the kids in the wagon. Cattle are uncertain."

THEY hoisted the babes and red dog into the wagon box. Larry's glance returned to the cattle with their continuous haze of dust. Through this he observed a second and heavier cloud farther away, stretching almost across the near horizon.

"Two herds!" yelled Larry. "They'll drink us out of business!"

A big and powerful rider, somewhat paunchy but broad of shoulder, appeared on a fine bay animal, racing around the flanks of the near-by herd. He reached the edge of the stream opposite Larry, and sat on his horse like a gigantic statue. His porky face, with its aquiline nose and small eyes, showed a faint smile of recognition.

Larry leaned against an oak tree.

"Hello, Kronberg," he acknowledged. "What do you want?"

"You own this land?" demanded Kronberg.

"Yep."

"Whose herd is this below you?"

Tom Hampton galloped up in time to hear the question.

"Mine," he asserted. "I claim from here down."

"All right," retorted Kronberg, "I claim from here up."

Larry, alarmed at these millstones closing upon him, held up a delaying hand.

"Here. Where do I come in?"

Kronberg eyed him for a moment, then—

"You got title to this land?"

"Possession."

"Yeh. It's public land. You grabbed it. Well, you can have an acre or so, but I've got cattle to keep!"

"I can't afford it!" interposed Hampton, hotly. "You'd drink the stream dry!"

"I've got to get water, mister!"

"So have I," retorted Hampton. "I came first!"

Kronberg swung his horse around.

"Yeh, but I'm biggest!"

Kronberg's riders went with him. Hampton's smaller group hesitated.

Suddenly Hampton gave his men quick orders. They raced their horses away. Shortly the red herd of Hampton began to come northward on the western side of the stream, bawling and stamping and lowing as they were driven toward a point opposite Larry's shade tree, where they could be interposed between Kronberg's herd and the stream at any place.

"Hampton's got brains!" approved Jackson, behind Larry.

"Yes, but those pesky cattle are going to ruin my camp!"

Larry was trying to think up some way to handle the situation. It had come suddenly, with such force as to leave him bewildered and overpowered. He was not a fighting man. Not yet. Ire and resentment were stirring within him but he was compelled to wait on circumstances.

The herd mobilized across the stream while alert riders circled around but kept mainly toward the west, where the other herd kicked up clouds of dust which reddened the sun.

Larry suddenly whirled on Jackson.

"Get everything into the wagon! I'll carry the tent. You grab the small stuff. Hurry!"

"Might as well," agreed Jackson. "We'll have to move, mebbe."

"Move, nothing! The wagon's heavy. The sides are thick. I've got a rifle. I'll use your pistol. We'll make 'em keep their distance both sides!"

"I ain't fit to fight," hesitated Jackson.

"All right. Nurse the babies."

For an instant Jackson's moody eyes widened with insult; but he turned away and collected dishes with his right hand, raining them into the wagon. Luckily the children were under a tarpaulin.

The herd near the stream held its place. The more distant dust-cloud seemed to be drawing off. It went farther. Larry's eyes narrowed. Could it be that Kronberg was beaten so easily?

A lurid flame whipped out from beyond the near-by cattle. A mushroom of smoke leaped into the air. A blast like a cannon shot made his ears ring. The ground shook under him. His soles tingled.

Hampton's thousand cattle snorted and wheeled eastward as if each red animal was mounted on a pivot.

In ten seconds Larry was looking straight into a mass of wild-eyed creatures with lowered horns, advancing like sabers in his direction. Their heavy feet drummed a thunderous tattoo as they swung into a frantic gallop and rushed at the line of oaks.

"Into the wagon!" yelled Larry.

The gaunt Jackson scrambled up by a rear wheel-hub. Larry raced through the trees. The banging, crashing, bawling herd reached the stream and splashed into it. Some went down. There were thuds and grunts. The rest thundered up the banks. A steer hit an oak tree and almost climbed its trunk as the rest pushed him up out of the mass.

LARRY reached the wagon. He vaulted over the back, grabbed his rifle, and cocked it.

The red panic was upon him. He saw a hundred crazy eyes rolling at him, flashing with white. The phalanx charged head on toward the wagon.

Larry fired and worked the lever and fired again and again. Two steers fell. The rest smashed into and over them.

The thick skulls of the leading steers crashed into the wagon's end, shoving it forward; but it was too heavy, and pointed uphill. There were thunderous thuds and tremendous grunts. Twenty tons of meat slammed into the leading steers and telescoped them, and then rose above them and butted the wagon several feet more; but it was again too heavy. More steers leaped behind them. Red bodies, bawling and grunting and kicking, churned each other into a hideous red mass.

Alongside the wagon, a swirl of horns and bodies and rolling eyes went past as a wave from the ocean goes past a headland.

They smashed the camp; they knocked down the beds and stamped them into splinters; they tore out young oak trees; they obliterated the stove; they rushed past the grove and raced uphill toward the horses still hitched to the plow. And then there were no horses.

Larry found his fists grinding into his cheeks. He cried out at the tumult. His camp and his work, all that he owned except a heavy wagon, disappeared in the twinkling of an eye; and then the thundering died down and other sounds came.

The babies were howling like banshees. Jackson was swearing. The mangled cattle were stumbling and grunting. From afar came a faint popping of pistols. Hoofs pounded as three savage looking riders came into the trees from the northward, splashing across the creek and swinging up to the wagon. One was Hampton, hatless and haggard, supporting a swaying fellow whose forehead was running red. The third rider covered their retreat. In his right hand was a six-shooter flashing in the sunlight.

"Here!" howled Hampton. "Take care of this man! Put him in the wagon! We'll stand 'em off at the creek!"

Larry jumped out and helped lift the man over the driver's seat and then he tucked Jackson's revolver into his belt and ran after Hampton, who sped back to the creek.

Over the tops of the sagebrush to the westward, blurring the whole near-by horizon with dust came a great line of cattle—Kronberg's cattle making for the water. Along their flanks, some distance to the northward and southward, were groups of riders.

Hampton dismounted at the stream's edge. A fourth horseman came up. Hampton glared at him like a man whose soul was afire.

"Where's Dick?" he bellowed.

"Run away," reported the rider.

"Where's Joe?"

"Chasin' our cattle."

"To thunder with our cattle!" raged Hampton. "Stand and fight! The dirty crooks, they had a can of powder in their cook wagon. They set it off—they started my cattle on the run. They've ruined me! All right. We'll see. Maybe we can do a little dirty work, too!"

Jackson sauntered up alongside Larry. Jackson's sad eyes looked north, south and west.

"Pore place to fight," he drawled. "They can come in from all directions. They're three to one. Better git back."

Hampton glared at Jackson.

"Shall I give 'em my herd, too?" snarled the savage cattleman.

"You ain't got any," grumbled Jackson, mildly. "By the time you git 'em together, the place is lost anyhow."

Hampton's fury turned to ice.

"Yeh? Mebbe you've got some bright idea in your system?"

"Run away. Fight when you're able to fight."

Hampton clenched his fists. Larry interposed—

"He's right!"

"You, too?" snarled Hampton, whirling upon him.

"Yes!" yelled Larry. "I've lost the same as you, but by thunder, I'm not going to let this big swine catch me when I'm helpless. Retreat! Get out of here! We'll come back when we can do something!"

Hampton closed his eyes and looked at the ground, like a tired man at the end of the trail. The oncoming cattle emerged from the brush and hastened at sight of the water.

Seven horsemen crossed the stream northward and swung down among the oaks. Kronberg, sitting on his animal like a feudal baron, kept his retainers behind him. They rode past the wagon and then halted, while Kronberg stared at the mangled beef. Larry and his friends walked toward them. Hampton's temper began to rise again.

"How about this?" he shouted at Kronberg.

Kronberg turned his head slowly.

"Law of necessity," he retorted. "The stream's not big enough for both of us."

"And I'm supposed to stand for this?"

Kronberg's little eyes were unblinking.

"What about it?" he inquired.

"Pay," suggested Larry.

Kronberg's complacent eyes turned toward him.

"Pay, nothin'. I've got as much right here as him."

"How about me?"

"You've got a camp here. Keep it. Put a fence around your acre."

Larry's fists clenched. An acre! His voice began to tremble:

"Who said you could tell me what land I could keep?"

Kronberg ignored it. Larry walked forward.

"I was speaking to you, Mister Kronberg!"

Larry's red setter, which had come down from the wagon, began to growl, sensing the atmosphere of conflict. When Larry stepped forward he ran ahead, barking and yelping. Kronberg sat silently. The dog bared his teeth, snarling.

Kronberg shot him.

The swift motion, the leaping pistol and the quick burst of flame came while Larry was five steps from Kronberg's horse. The dog dug its nose into the ground and pitched forward.

Larry halted in his tracks. His lips parted and into his widening blue eyes came a look of such stark disbelief and such utter bewilderment that Kronberg laughed and his men echoed it.

"You shot my dog!" mumbled Larry as if he could not believe it. "You shot my dog!"

Kronberg laughed again at his ludicrous consternation.

Larry trembled. A wave of ferocious anger surged through his veins and gathered force.

His palsied body sprang to action. His right hand yanked the six-shooter out of his belt as he leaped at the blurred red figure of Kronberg sitting on a red horse amid red men where a red sky danced like a streaky pinwheel. Wild flames leaped from the pistol, exploding in frantic haste—*bang-bang-bang*—in the general direction of the great red silhouette on the horse, which jumped with amazing swiftness and danced around so that the undisciplined shots went far astray.

A line of orange flame lashed out from the rider, then another; then a shot from somewhere else.

A bar of iron hit Larry's head. He felt its shattering impact, and then came darkness.

V

LARRY struggled to consciousness in a swaying wagon filled with hot sunshine and cold misery.

He found himself propped against the wagon's side-wall with a rag bound around his aching head and with various belongings bouncing around the floor. Alongside him lay the wounded cowpuncher and the mournful Jackson with his arm in a sling. At Jackson's right was a puncher smoking cigarets, while the fretful babies lay on straw under the wagon seat. Hampton and one of his men were trying to drive a pair of cow-ponies forced into harness, but the experiment was not entirely happy, as shown by the jolting of the wagon making wild forays off the road. But the vehicle was heavy, and before it reached town the ponies were less spirited.

It was a silent crew in the wagon. Larry's headache began to pass—luckily he had received a glancing wound along the left side of his head—and his thoughts began to return to the catastrophe under the oak trees.

"I'm going to learn to shoot better!" he blurted, at dusk.

"You'll need more'n shootin'," mourned Jackson. "You got to control yourself."

"He shot my dog."

"Yeh, and he pretty nigh shot your head off. You went off at half cock."

Larry studied his gaunt and solemn critic not without resentment.

"Well," conceded Larry, "you probably know more about fighting than I do!"

Jackson looked alarmed.

"Who? Me? No, sir! I'm a peaceful man, mister. You ought to be peaceful, too. If you want to fight, do it right. Get an army."

Larry sat back and watched the daylight fade away, but Jackson's last words kept ringing in his ears. An army! Yes, that would handle the situation very nicely, but how could a ruined cattleman and a beaten homesteader expect such a miracle?

The finale of the recent drama was very easy to reconstruct. He had fired wildly, Kronberg had shot at him, and then Kronberg had sent Larry's friends scurrying out of the place.

Larry was still thinking about it when the wagon reached town and halted in a field of dry grass behind a Chinese laundry, long after midnight. He drew Hampton beyond a tree.

"Listen!" said Larry. "Have you got two hundred dollars?"

"Yeh. Why?"

"I want it. I'll get another two hundred. We'll fight for our property."

"That bullet must have hurt you worse than I thought!"

"No! I see a chance to drive that fellow away from that stream!"

"You'd better hurry, then. My cattle, what's left of 'em, are parchin' up in the hills."

"Why did you leave them?" wondered Larry.

"Lost heart. The odds are too big. Anyhow, one of my men's with 'em."

"Can you get six men who will fight?"

Hampton—beaten, ruined and irritated—was not in a mood for parley.

"Say, what's on your mind? Spill it! I'm tired!"

"I'll hire a lot of men at two dollars per day. They'll have horses and they'll be armed."

"You think they'd fight at that price? Huh! Boy, you better go to bed and shut up. I'm tired."

The beaten Hampton sought his blankets and Larry followed suit.

But next morning his idea returned and amplified itself. He dressed his babes, washed their thin faces and took them into town, where acquaintances halted him at every store entrance. The story of the stampede had run like wildfire—some of Hampton's men had gone to town early—and so the blond young guardian of the babies found himself explaining the whole business.

Sympathy was expressed. Larry addressed one townsman point blank—

"Will you help me get my land back?"

"Nope. Why should I? You've got to stand on your own feet. If a man can't hold what he's got, he's out of luck. It's a law of nature, ain't it?"

"That's logic," nodded Larry. "Well, will you work for two dollars a day?"

"What doin'?"

"Riding. Two days. You and your horse and gun."

The townsman became suspicious.

"You'd get me into a fight, eh?"

"No. I give my word. I want a lot of men to take a ride. No fighting, no danger, no work, no talk, no questions."

A husky fellow shouldered past the other.

"It's my meat!" he bellowed. "When do I start?"

"This morning."

"Me, too!" yelled another, and then another.

"Sounds crazy," demurred some one else.

"What do you care?" scoffed Larry. "Good pay, good grub, no fighting and no work. If you fellows want the job, see me at my camp down yonder."

LEAVING a mystified crowd behind him, he swung into the Southwestern Restaurant. Bessie Fitzgerald was still on the job, serving a few customers whose clean faces and clothes testified that the cultural trend of this place was on the up-grade. Larry seated himself on a stool and arranged his babes on either side of him. The girl came toward them swiftly.

"What beautiful children!" she exclaimed.

He had never noticed it before. Their faces—they happened to be washed recently—were tinged with the pale, delicate pink complexions which only small children can achieve. Their eyes were big and blue. Their hair was light brown. They were not yet entirely healthy or happy—recent experiences had been too abrupt—but they looked as if they might survive yet.

Little Jimmy curled a finger around Bessie's hand. She lifted him.

"Yours?" she inquired.

"Yes, ma'am. I found them," he explained, giving a short sketch of how it happened.

"But they ought to have better care!" she admonished.

"Yes. Some day maybe a woman will care for them. But it's going to be the right woman. You could have the job any time you wanted."

She seemed alarmed, and then she looked out of the window and smiled.

"I'm afraid I'd be too expensive to hire!"

"Well," he suggested, slowly, "if you ever get less expensive, tell me."

Her hazel eyes narrowed just a trifle.

"I had an escort once who said you were fresh. I didn't believe it, but I don't know what to believe now."

He sobered.

"I'm not fresh, ma'am. I'm just rattled. Two kids are too many, but I have to try to do the best I can for 'em, don't I?"

"You do," she agreed with a friendly nod. "I think you are very decent about it."

But she said no more about being hired, and he let the subject drop. Shortly he took his two little burdens to the doctor's office, a frame shack some distance up the board walk, beyond a harnesss hop, a baker, two saloons, a dance-hall, a bank and a small general store. The bearded doctor happened to be in. He sat entrenched behind an aged desk, writing bills forgotten for many months. He frowned as Larry intruded.

"I'd like you to keep these kids for a few days," requested the farmer from Illinois. "Feed 'em up. Send me the bill."

"Keep 'em yourself!" growled the doctor.

"I can't. I'm going to war."

"What war? Where? When? Who?"

"My own war. I got kicked off my ranch. I'm going to fight for it."

The doctor's lips curled in a grim smile.

"Thanks for the business, but I have enough patients right now. Are you planning to fight on even terms or do you give odds?"

"The odds will be in my favor."

"Humph. You're more sensible than the last time!"

"Then you'll care for the kids?"

The doctor appraised them grudgingly.

"I might as well. Young fools with wars on their hands are poor nurses. But suppose you get shot?"

Larry hadn't thought of that.

"Give 'em to a man named Ben Jackson," he suggested. "Or better yet, give 'em to Miss Fitzgerald."

The doctor nodded with grave sarcasm.

"I see. Miss Fitzgerald. She's in your mind, eh? You go where you have plenty of rivals, don't you? Maybe you'll get yourself shot even if you do come back!"

Larry had no reply so he fled as quickly as possible, walking through town to his wagon, where a large delegation of townsmen was gathered—to the frank dismay of the swearing Hampton and the bashful Jackson. When Larry appeared, the two of them pounced upon him and dragged him beyond the Chinese laundry.

"What sort of a rannikaboo game have you started?" demanded Hampton.

"Just what I promised," retorted Larry. "We'll hire a crowd of men. We'll put six real fighters among 'em. They'll go out to my ranch and look like an army. It's scenery, see? Kronberg and his crowd will feel small. We'll start our fighters ahead and chase Kronberg off the range. He'll think he's outnumbered."

Hampton looked at Jackson.

"Holy smoke!" said the awed cattleman.

The mild and melancholy Jackson with the droopy mustache stared at Larry for some time, and in the man's sad brown-black eyes was a glimmer of something resembling humor. But his voice was disconsolate.

"Kronberg might come to town. He'd get the news and spile the plan."

"We have to move quickly," said Larry.

"Kronberg might talk to your gang when you get there."

"We'll keep our fighters between 'em."

"If fightin' starts, your big crowd would run away."

"The fighting mustn't start. It's all a bluff. I'm banking that Kronberg won't have the nerve to stand off fifty men with guns in their hands. Would you?"

Hampton reached into his pocket and pulled out a small sack of gold pieces.

"Here's my roll!" he roared, with jubilation in his voice. "Take it! Get me four hundred dollars' worth of army!"

Larry turned to the gaunt and round-shouldered Jackson with his one arm in the sling.

"Are you going, too?" inquired Larry.

Jackson shrank away.

"Who? Me? No, sir. There might be fightin'. I'll hang around town."

"Sure. You ought to take a long rest."

"I'm goin' to, General!" said Jackson with a queer twisty smile on his gaunt face. "Mebbe you'll win at that!"

It was the first praise and the first wry attempt at a smile which Larry had ever wrung from his gloomy, droopy, taciturn companion. But the latter refused to gush further, and started toward town. His gaunt, shambling, stoop-shouldered figure in ragged blue jeans and blue shirt and ruined black hat was quickly out of sight around the corner of the laundry.

Larry opened his recruiting office, hiring fifty assorted loafers.

TWO hours later, without the knowledge or consent of the town constable, he and Hampton rode out at the head of the unreliable cavalry, bunched together on the narrow road that led to Oak Tree Creek. They camped on the prairie at night, and early next morning they resumed the short march toward the mass of cattle among the trees up ahead. Larry halted his mob when they came within a mile of their goal.

"Ride stirrup to stirrup!" he commanded.

"Keep your mouths shut, no matter what happens!"

"Suppose there's trouble?" demurred a nervous rider.

"There'll be no trouble!" snapped Larry. "Keep your mouths shut!"

Hampton gazed at the horsemen swinging into a long line facing westward. They looked formidable. The sun shone on rifle-barrels and pistol-belts and accouterments, and the riders sat erect like men born to the saddle, which they were. But the whole array was a fraud, and Hampton lost faith.

"They don't look good to me!" he grumbled.

"Put a couple of your men among 'em," decided Larry. "Tell the rest of your real riders to circle ahead. We'll keep Kronberg far away from 'em. If any one goes near 'em, tell your man in the middle to fire."

The orders were given. The cavalry troop, in company front, swung ahead on one long line, kicking up prodigious dust. But Larry felt undue perspiration under his hatband. The nearer he went toward those red cattle, the more frightful his experiment seemed.

Agitated figures appeared among the cattle. Several men at a cook-wagon on the slope beyond the oak trees mounted their animals and came forward at a gallop. Riders at the flanks of the cattle converged toward the center. They merged into a group and started toward Larry and Hampton, who held back their outriders and ordered the main troop to go slowly.

"We'd better go ahead of everybody," suggested Larry.

Hampton was nervous. His face was pale and his eyes were worried, but he clamped his jaw under the black mustache and gave a grim nod.

They rode onward. Larry suddenly motioned his cavalry to stop.

A big figure came in the lead of the advancing group. It was Kronberg. Larry, motivated by sheer frantic determination, now that the crisis was here, spurred his horse and rode straight toward him.

The big man's face was chalky. His little eyes were stricken and the lips of his small mouth were inclined to purse together. Suddenly Larry realized the truth. This man was more afraid of the approaching ordeal than Larry was!

It wasn't personal fear. The man had the courage of a hog, but hogs hate to be deprived of their plunder, and Larry saw the awful blow he was about to deal. But he steeled his resolution.

He glanced back and saw how the thing looked to Kronberg. The formidable line of armed men stretched across the sagebrush —silent, grim, austere plainsmen whose weapons flashed in the sunlight.

Larry laughed, and then he turned to Kronberg.

"Get out of here!"

Kronberg held up a propitiating hand.

"Listen!" he bawled. "I had to do it, didn't I? You can't blame a man for tryin' to water his cattle! Be reasonable! You can have your ranch back. I don't want it. What are you kickin' about?"

"Do I get my cattle back?" demanded Hampton in a voice of cold fury.

"I had to get to water!" insisted Kronberg.

Hampton, his temper was on edge, whipped out his pistol.

"Do we have to smash you and your cattle both?" he roared. "Are you going to get out or do we have to shoot you out?"

Kronberg's little eyes flared with passion, but the line of armed riders was in his vision.

"What do you want?" he implored. "You've got me. What are your terms?"

"Pay for the beef you've ruined. Drive your cattle over the ridge. The next spring is two days away. Get out!"

Kronberg turned whiter. He gathered up the reins.

"I'm goin' to talk to your crowd," he announced. "Maybe they'll listen to reason!"

He spurred his horse, which leaped forward. Larry's blood froze as the man started past.

A shot came from Hampton's nearest rider, ripping a bullet into the ground in front of Kronberg's horse, making the big fellow yank it back on its haunches.

For an instant Larry saw his whole majestic bluff reeling to a tumble.

The sound of the shot stirred his spurious army as a sudden wind shakes the leaves of a tree. Kronberg's tense riders reached at their weapons, waiting for a signal. Had one of them yelled or fired a shot, Larry knew his fate. For forty seconds he sat with his heart thumping like mad. Then:

"You've got me!" howled Kronberg, in wild exasperation. "What can I do? Where did you get all those men?"

"The town was stirred up," lied Hampton coolly. "They heard of your smart tricks. They came here to teach you not to get too gay. Are you goin' to move on or do we have to fight?"

Kronberg tossed up his hands.

"Aw, I can't fight everybody!"

"All right," snarled Hampton. "Come over to your cook-wagon then."

They went. There was long palaver, mingled with savage outbursts of irritation. But Larry's silent line of riders held their positions, and before noon the Kronberg cattle, herded by dejected men, swung southward past the oak trees for a long, hard march toward another water hole in the higher mountains miles away.

Hampton had forced Kronberg to restore five hundred head of cattle, which the victor began to mobilize along the creek. The remnant of Hampton's own parched herd began to stagger down from the hills.

"I owe it to you," admitted the cattleman at lunch under the oaks. "We'll be good neighbors, maybe pardners. Kronberg was licked proper!"

Larry gazed toward the cloud of dust far to the southward which marked the retreating herd.

"I kicked a hog out of a trough once," remarked Larry. "He came back."

VI

LARRY went to town, collected his babes, rented a shanty and found a job to earn money toward a real home at Oak Tree Creek.

Larry's fake army and its successful bluff gave the county a hearty laugh. The jovial greetings of the townsmen pleased him until he began to consider the aftermath. His ranch was safe in Hampton's keeping, his victory was complete, but somewhere out on the distant ranges was a powerful person who was bound to learn the truth and demand a savage reckoning.

Jackson—he mooned around the town dolefully and seemed to have no visible means of support—soon caught Larry firing at tin cans in a brushy little gulch, a quarter-mile behind the main street. Jackson sat on a hump of dirt and watched the unsuspecting Larry as he swung back his arm, whipped out a six-shooter, fired, examined the effect and sheathed the weapon for another try.

"You're wastin' a lot o' shells!" complained Jackson.

Larry whirled around.

"Oh, hello. I'm just practising."

"Never shot much before, did you?"

"Never had to."

"Who you goin' to shoot now?"

Larry's voice had a hopeless ring.

"Kronberg is going to learn what happened. Should I give him all the advantage?"

"Huh!"

"I don't want to fight, Jackson. I want to live and let live. But what can I do?"

"Try that draw again," suggested Jackson.

Larry tried it.

"Seems like you ought to keep your hand open till you touch the butt of the gun," mourned Jackson. "You git too eager."

Larry started to obey, then relaxed and grinned.

"Say, what are you?" he blurted. "Gun-fighter, bandit, rustler, nester, trader, preacher or undertaker?"

"Pilgrim," said Jackson.

And that was all of that, though it had an aftermath.

Strangely Jackson did not meet Larry next day nor the day after. At first Larry did not notice it; but as the days passed he began to suspect that the melancholy fellow was keeping away. Once he was seen beyond the doorway of a low saloon, mingling with cheap loafers, but Jackson made no sign of recognition, and Larry passed on, frowning.

"Funny!" he cogitated. "No gratitude, no appreciation, not even good-by! Oh, well, he's that way and there's no cure for it."

No overtures came from Jackson.

Larry learned that Hampton was doing well, and that Kronberg had reached water after a frightful journey, and that seven dominant men, one of them the town banker, were striving for the favor of the bewildered girl in the Southwestern Restaurant. But the gaunt stranger whom Larry had rescued in the mountains showed no further sign of friendship.

They met by accident at the entrance to the restaurant.

"I see you're hangin' around that gal," grumbled Jackson, who seemed more scrawny and tattered than ever.

"Well, what of it?"

"Huh! You're out o' your class. Banker, storekeeper, stableman and faro dealer! They're too big for you. Git out before you're knocked out!"

Larry grinned. He was irritated at the man's attitude.

"That's my business!" he suggested.

"I s'pose you think she's the right gal to help bring up the kids!" observed Jackson.

The puzzled young farmer from Illinois considered whether to take offense or consider the man drunk; but he wasn't drunk. He was merely depressing, as usual.

"That," decided Larry, slowly, "will be my business, too. Say, Jackson, what's the matter with you?"

"Matter with me?"

Jackson raised his voice with sudden truculence, so that a half a dozen townsmen and loafers began to look interested.

"It ain't me. It's you. I got no use for you. I'm no friend of yours and I never was!"

"Jackson!" gasped Larry.

But Jackson's voice became raucous.

"Yeh. Just because you took me in your wagon and gave me a little grub ain't no sign I've got to lick yore boots!"

"For heaven's sake—"

"I don't like you and I never will. Git that? You go about yore business and I'll go about mine. If you think you're out because you fed me, here's pay!"

Jackson produced a twenty-dollar goldpiece and held it forth. Larry, amazed and outraged, made no motion. Jackson flicked the coin upon Larry's boots.

The affront made Larry's face whiten; but he remembered that the man still had one arm in a sling, so he reached down and picked up the coin.

"Here," he suggested. "Take it. You may need it."

Jackson lowered his moody, brown-black eyes.

"All right," he grunted. "I guess I do!"

He put the coin in his pocket, turned his back to Larry and shambled away without another word.

"The dirty skunk!" exclaimed a townsman. "Why didn't you poke him anyhow?"

Larry watched the gaunt and solemn figure retreat down the board walk.

"What's the use?" he growled. "I guess he doesn't know any better!"

"Well, he's no friend of yours, mister. You better watch out for him!"

"But why?" demanded Larry.

There was no answer.

The young farmer from Illinois tried to analyze the matter all day and some of the night. But next morning the thing was driven out of his mind while he was working on the side wall of a barn just across the plaza from the town's main buildings.

The mustached Bill, his fellow carpenter, went to the general store for some nails, returning in a hurry.

"Did you see those five riders just came in?" yelled Bill. "It's Kronberg and four of his men!"

Larry glanced across the sagebrush flat and then resumed marking a board.

"He's got blood in his eye!" insisted Bill. "Somebody laughed at him on the saloon steps! He pushed the fellow inside and knocked him down!"

"Well? What can I do about it?"

"You're supposed to duck," instructed Bill. "He's in that sort of a temper."

LARRY examined the flat pencil in his hands and then he glanced over toward the saloon in the middle of the block where small knots of citizens were congregating. One or two other buildings began to erupt laggard sightseers as if there was some sort of catastrophe brewing. The morning sunshine assumed a purplish hue to Larry's eyes, as if poisonous violet rays were becoming unduly prominent.

Suddenly a big form pushed from the crowd and swung off the porch steps, pointing an arm toward Larry's barn. Arms waved in protest. One man got in his way, as if urging him to desist, but he shoved the fellow aside.

"Kronberg! It's come!" blurted Larry. "Where's the town constable?"

"Sick," said Bill. "His deputy's diggin' a well up in the hills. You'd better duck!"

Kronberg, swinging his arms freely, started across the plaza.

A few doors and windows along the side street banged open. Somebody yelled.

"Duck!" yelped Bill, grabbing Larry's shoulder. "You fool, you're in danger!"

Larry's face was pale but his voice was under control.

"What's the use? He'd meet me sooner

or later. I might as well face it. There's no out. Let be."

He stood as if in a trance, watching the big figure coming closer; and then he went to his tool box, lifted its top, hauled out a cartridge-belt with a six-shooter in a pendant holster and strapped the thing around his waist.

He wore high boots, a pair of carpenters' white overalls and a broad-brimmed hat, so the addition of the cartridge-belt evolved a figure that verged on the grotesque. But Larry felt far from grotesque. His blue eyes held the steely glare of a man who is scared but resolute.

There may be men without fear, but possibly these iron persons are abnormal or subnormal, and this becomes the more probable when it is considered that the great Creator put fear into the heart of all creatures so that they might survive. Otherwise there wouldn't be any human race, or any other race, for being fearless they would jump off cliffs, eat poisons, fight hopeless fights, rush into traps and so comport themselves as to erase themselves from the scheme of things in short order. It may be that the pick of the world are those who, having fears, find the greatness or the logic to hold them down when necessary.

Larry was normal. Being normal, he could not afford to let his fears sway him. The other fellow was abnormal, lifted by a feeling of superiority which made him feel as a rhinoceros would feel when facing a shepherd dog. It was not a matter of courage. A rhino needs no courage.

"Here's the fellow I want!" roared the cattleman. "Make a laughin' stock of me, will you?"

Bill made himself small against the wall of the barn. Larry held up his left hand.

"You started it," he pleaded.

But the cattleman had ridden long, hot miles with thirsty cattle, only to earn ridicule. The thought of his savage losses made his little eyes gleam with red pupils.

"Started it! You sneak, you dirty bluffer, you fake. You with your fake riders—makin' me ride eighty miles. Did you think you could get away with that?"

Beyond him, doors and windows kept banging open. Two men straggled into the plaza, then ran back. Somebody yelled. The crowd on the porches began to thin out.

Larry kept his left hand extended.

"Wait!" he cried. "I know. But look what I was up against. Stop this! Be sensible!"

The big fellow towered above him.

"Sensible! Ridin' eighty mile, with cattle dyin'! Sensible! You sharp-tongued crook, you shifty sneak, you dirty sharper, I've got you now! I see you've got a gun. Huh! Touch it! Touch it, you cringin' dog! Touch it! Let me blow your head off! Come on! Touch it! I'll beat you to the draw! I'll show it's self-defense and then I'll plant you! Come on! Touch it!"

"Wait!" yelled Larry. "You think you've got the advantage. You haven't. I don't want to kill you!"

"Touch it!" raged Kronberg, holding his right hand near his hip.

"No! Don't make me!"

Kronberg stepped forward. His left hand slapped out, just flicking the end of Larry's nose. Larry's body swung back a trifle. His eyes narrowed. He cried—

"I can't argue with you."

Kronberg's body tensed and his eyes widened, as if he awakened to an amazing surprize. His arm jerked in desperation to his hip and the butt of his heavy pistol was lifted up from the holster. But Larry's right hand had moved. His pistol flashed out like silver in the sunlight. It exploded. It exploded again. And again.

The pistol at Kronberg's hip fell to the ground. Kronberg's mouth opened in stark surprize, as if the rings of smoke widening around his face and chest were unbelievable miracles. His stare was incredulous, fascinated, startled. Then his amazed pop eyes closed and he grunted and fell upon his face.

"He didn't think it could happen!" groaned Larry.

Yells came from around the plaza. Men streamed out from the porches.

Larry walked to his carpenter bench and laid down his pistol. Then he wiped his hands on his overalls, very slowly, like a person who is tired. His hands were trembling.

VII

THE grizzled town constable, coming out of a sick-bed, was first to identify himself from the moving forms which surged off the porches and straggled toward the still figure lying in front of the new barn. The constable was unshaven, his coat was off, his suspenders flapped behind him, his shirt-tail was out and his trousers achieved an accordeon effect as he lumbered across the plaza. He yelled—

"Hey, you—what'd you shoot that man for?"

"I couldn't help it," defended Larry.

"Yeh. That's what they all say."

"Well, what am I going to do when a wild-eyed lunatic wants to kill me?"

"Most people run."

Larry tossed up helpless hands.

The multitude crowded up behind the constable, who leaned over the prone body, lifted a shoulder, touched the nodding head, and let him fall back. The constable held out a hand to Larry.

"Gun, please."

The young farmer pointed to the carpenters' bench. The constable took up the weapon.

"You're under arrest," he announced.

There was a murmur in the crowd.

"What else could I do?" pleaded the stricken Larry.

"Yep. He was an overbearin' critter, a bully. Nobody liked him, but this here's a law-abidin' country. There's got to be a trial. You can tell it to the judge."

The judge—ordinarily the town barber, pomaded and perfumed and wearing a coat which was white every Monday and less white each succeeding day—stood in the front rank of the townsmen and gave Larry a faint smile of reassurance, though the presence of the dead man made his swarthy face paler than usual.

"He owed me nine dollars," said the judge, with a jerk of his thumb toward the dead man. "Every time I asked him to pay, he roared at me. Huh!"

Larry looked away, feeling somewhat sick.

"Come on," urged the constable.

Larry started obediently. The crowd followed.

"But how about my kids?" he wondered when they reached the main buildings.

"Anything you want," agreed the constable. "Better git some one to take keer of 'em."

They were in front of the roofed porch of the restaurant. A crowd of loungers stood watching, and behind them was Bessie Fitzgerald, peering out from the doorway with consternation and reproach in her eyes. Larry turned away.

"Let the doctor have 'em," he decided.

"Sure," said the constable.

They walked along the dirt street toward the jail, leading a murmuring crowd past the saloons and gambling houses and bank. Along the line of loafers at the porch-edge sat Jackson, whittling a hickory spoke, disdaining to look up. That hurt. The farmer from Illinois stared at his droopy mustache and shiny bald head, wondering at the reasons for this hostility and wonderdering why it rankled. Larry would have given much, just then, for a friendly word from the man he had befriended. Not that Larry was in any danger from the law, but because he had killed a man. And killing a man makes the normal soul lonely and afraid and somewhat sick.

Then he found himself rebelling at Jackson. Jackson knew the causes of the shooting. Jackson knew what Larry was up against. Didn't the pleasant days at Oak Tree Creek strike any chord in the man? Didn't he have any gratitude or any sensibilities? But no, he hadn't. He sat in the shade and whittled. His drowsy eyes watched the slow knife as it went up and down.

Larry looked away. After all, why should he annoy himself concerning this shiftless, shambling, droopy drifter from nowhere?

"I guess he's worthless," muttered the prisoner.

"Who?" demanded the constable.

"A fellow back there."

"Huh! We've got lots of 'em."

Officer and prisoner passed from the plaza. The spectators thinned. The main show was over anyhow.

"There's a lot of strange cattle driftin' in," remarked the constable. "We ain't got 'em classified yet. Some time I'll git a little time and go after their histories, but mebbe some of 'em'll be hard to catch. Not that we're a tough town. We're on the up grade. Still and all, we're bound to git a lot of scrubs and bimeby I'm goin' to thin 'em out."

LARRY saw three riders of the late Kronberg outfit, sun-bitten nondescripts in high boots, overalls, tattered shirts and cartridge-belts with weapons. They chose to ignore him, looking down the street as he passed. Their boss was dead and his cause demanded their aggressive loyalty no longer. Their attitude registered a truce.

The keen-eyed constable saw it in a glance.

"Yep," he ventured, "mebbe we're goin' to have peace and good will, mebbe!"

A gigantic fellow with a hairy face and bitter little eyes shambled around the corner of a barn, halting in mid-step at sight of the constable and then turning and starting back up the street. Larry watched him. It was Bender, the big stupid bear with the violent disposition.

"What's he doing here?" demanded the prisoner.

"Dunno. Haven't classified him."

"Does he work anywhere?"

"Nope."

Larry looked back over his shoulder. The mournful figure of Ben Jackson was still in the shade of the porch roof, whittling at the hickory spoke. The larger figure of Bender lumbered toward him, caught sight of the whittler, halted, twitched, changed course and hastened between two frame structures built about two feet apart.

The whittler kept whittling. His knife never changed its deliberate stroke. But somehow his figure seemed tense and malignant while his eyes appeared to be exceedingly beady though they had hardly looked up from the wheel-spoke.

Considering Jackson's immobility, Bender's hasty retreat was grotesque. But Larry did not feel like laughing.

"Well," he surmised, "you'll classify 'em some day, all right!"

"Sure," agreed the constable. "The tough ones always show themselves up sooner or later. Birds of a feather butter no parsnips. Well, here's your boodwar. Welcome. There's four gents here to keep you company."

The four gents, graceless young ruffians with hard faces and humorous eyes, made way with mock deference as the blond young farmer ambled among them and looked around after the thick door was closed. He found himself in a wooden room with two barred doors and little else. There was no furniture, no sanitation and no lighting system except candles which greased a corner of the floor. Four tattered blankets, some pannikins of stew, a bucket of water and a few old newspapers were the only objects to relieve the ill-smelling bareness of a typical small town calaboose.

"I'll bring blankets," promised the constable.

"Thanks," said Larry. "And watch out for my kids, will you?"

"Shore. The doc's there now. The whole town's helpin'. We've got kind hearts, mister. We've watched you herdin' them kids and it's made us feel sorter friendly toward you. That's why we'll have your trial right away, so you can git out."

It was the first intimation that the public had noticed Larry and his burdens. He had been too busy to see it, but suddenly he remembered certain trifling acts of kindness in the recent past. He had thought they meant amused appreciation of his feat with the fake army. Now he saw it was something deeper.

"Thanks," he said, humbly. "You're white."

The tallest of the four men, a lantern-jawed blond, bawled out of the window.

"Hey! When do we get our trial?"

"What do you care?" rasped the constable.

"That ain't justice, mister!"

"No? Well, what of it? You'll get convicted and come right back to jail, won't you? What difference does it make?"

The four men growled.

"Well," conceded the amiable constable, "if you insist on gettin' convicted right away, go to it. You can have a trial next week."

"Aw, go soak your head!"

THE constable snorted and stamped away, leaving the four gents alone with their new associate. They grinned a welcome as they seated themselves against the wall. Larry joined them.

"What are you in for?" inquired a tall and hard-faced member of the quartet.

"Shooting a man."

"Who?"

"Kronberg, a cattleman."

"Huh!" commented the man alongside Larry. "You don't look like a gunfighter!"

"Sometimes you have to be." Then, mainly to change the subject, "What charge did they lodge against you fellows?"

"Oh, workin' for prohibition."

"How?"

"Oh, we started to put a big saloon out of business but they wouldn't let us."

Larry smiled and laid his blond head against the wall. The presence of this quartet made his memory work back toward certain garbled statements at Oak Tree Creek concerning them.

"Say," he blurted, "who is this fellow, Jackson?"

"Jackson?"

"Yes. Ben Jackson. Bald-headed, long mustache, black eyes, looks as if he lost his last friend. He's leader of the gang, isn't he?"

"What gang?"

"Your gang. He said you fellows went off at half cock."

The four gents looked at each other but their eyes were very innocent. The shortest of the quartet, a brunet with wiry black stubble on his jaw, nodded gravely.

"There was a big gang workin' on the new railroad back beyond the mountains. We had a foreman like you describe, but the gang's busted up. I hear he's tried to get his men back."

"Yes," said Larry. "He's in town now."

Four heads came erect. Larry persisted:

"How about this big bearded lunk-head. Dave Bender? Where does he come in? wasn't he part of the gang?"

Eight speculative eyes inspected Larry at length.

"Yes, he was fired," informed the brunet, dryly, producing a battered deck of cards. "Forget it."

Larry suspected there were four good liars in the room, but he couldn't prove it, so he played cards.

Toward evening the constable brought blankets and a meal of stew which he delivered alertly with his hand near his six-shooter as he opened the door and then shut it with a bang.

The lantern-jawed blond man watched him lazily.

"Some day," observed the blond, "he'll slip up."

"Yes," agreed Larry. "I noticed."

"Sure. Accidents will happen. Will you be with us or him?"

"Him."

"Fair enough."

Dusk came. A great bearded face loomed at the window and two small bloodshot eyes surveyed the interior. The four men glanced up and went on playing. Larry felt less comfortable. It was Dave Bender. He addressed himself to the others—

"You changed your mind yet?"

"Go soak your head," advised the lantern-jawed blond, drawing three cards.

The big fellow's mighty hands shook the bars. He roared:

"I'll give you one more day. Then I'll tell 'em all about you! Ya-a-a! You'll laugh at me, eh? Huh! You think I'm a joke?"

"Nope, tragedy," said the brunet. "You're through. Go bury yourself!"

The giant blared maledictions, shaking fists at the bars. The card-players let him rave, so he lurched away with a final volley of threats. Night came, still and silent, broken only by the jangle of a piano in a distant dance-hall.

The candles threw feeble lights and larger shadows around the prison. The card-players played on, killing time, until they were interrupted by a pleasant voice coming through the barred window:

"Hey, McCall, anything you want?"

Larry looked up at the bars. Beyond them the feeble light identified the chubby, round face of Henry Lewis, the town banker and the one dude fashion plate who was allowed to wear tailored city clothes without battling for his life.

The present attitude of Lewis expressed neighborly sympathy, mixed with an unconscious air of satisfaction. He was really sorry for Larry; he had come because of sheer good-fellowship to offer his services; but he could not suppress a slight note of triumph at seeing a rival so beautifully cooped.

He touched upon this topic, somewhat thoughtlessly, after he and Larry had exchanged a few polite words over the window sill. The banker did not come to gloat but his mouth was faster than his brain and he opened Larry's eyes to the damage he had done. The banker tried to keep his voice low, though the quiet quartet on the floor probably heard every word.

"It's mighty hard on Bessie. That dog fight in the plaza, right in front of her eyes, gave her a shock. She said she never wanted to see you again."

Larry stared past Lewis' face, whose expression was blurred by the shadows of the bars.

"Did she send that message by you?" inquired Larry.

Lewis realized his own crudeness and began to hedge:

"No. It wasn't a message. I just told you by accident, you might say."

"Thanks," dryly.

"Oh, I'm not rubbing it in," amended Lewis, floundering deeper. "It's—well, women are peculiar that way. They don't like that sort of thing. I'm not blaming you. Any other man would have done the same, but it makes a difference. Still, you shouldn't take it too much to heart. You might say—well, it's plain accident."

Larry observed the other's dilemma and tried to be polite but he felt more like choking the man. The banker was shrewd enough in business and bore the reputation of a solid citizen, but at this sort of thing he was not exactly clever and Larry thought he caught an exasperating message in the man's unconscious attitude, as if he had said, "You poor ——, you were a powerful rival for this girl and we all feared you, but now you've put yourself out of the running and I'm glad that you have, although personally I am very sorry for you. I appreciate what you have done for us, very much. I am, in fact, extremely grateful."

There was a long pause. Then Lewis' actual voice spoke again:

"If there's anything I can possibly do for you, count on me. Is there anything I can get for you? Anything you would like to have?"

The voice of the lantern-jawed blond man replied for Larry:

"He wants a box of good seegars, a dozen packs of smokin', a razor, a mirror, some soap, a crowbar—"

"Shut up!" snapped Lewis. "I'm speaking to McCall!"

"Well, we're listenin', ain't we?"

"Yes," grumbled Lewis, thinking of his talk to Larry, "I'm afraid you are! Whoa! What's that?"

Three shots came with startling distinctness from down the street. The shots were fired at slow and deliberate intervals—bang—bang—bang!

There was a distant yell and then a series of massed howls.

The four gents in the jail sprang to their feet and cocked their heads. One of them jumped toward the candles and blew them out. The others groped toward the door.

There was a stifled yell from the banker at the window. A fusilade of shots came from down the street. Heavy boots raced toward the jail.

A key tinkered with the lock. The door swung wide open.

VIII

THE events which followed the opening of the jail gave Larry confused impressions of many things happening at once.

The four men scurried out of the door, one of them yanking him along. He saw the town's main street like a nocturnal Fourth of July celebration, with vicious flashes dancing in front of the buildings.

Lights began to go out. Yells arose and then stopped. Citizens ran toward the big dance-hall. Behind them were demoniac forms firing into the ground or into the air, chasing them faster.

The men near Larry vanished.

The banker raced around the corner, egged on by a man who held a gun at his spine, running him into the jail. He puffed and groaned. From down the street came another running pair with the constable profanely in the lead and a vigorous scoundrel prodding him onward. The banker and the constable reached the jail door at the same instant. They popped inside. The door banged behind them.

"Hey!" gasped Larry.

The man who had rushed the banker stuck a six-shooter into his face and whirled him around.

"Into the dance-hall, you!"

"But say—"

"Hurry up or I'll blow you in two!"

The pistol hit Larry's back like a prod. He found himself moving rapidly. He trotted past the darkened bank with its one door and two windows, just as a booming explosion came from within.

Three men outside the bank rushed inside as if they had waited for the flash and noise. Smoke billowed out of the shattered windows. Glass spewed into the street.

A man on horseback galloped up to the bank. His voice was terrific.

"Hey, hey—git a move on! Two minutes and no more! Hurry!"

The amazed Larry recognized the voice. In the half-light from the near-by dance-hall, crowded with surprized citizens held behind the wide doors by two masked guards with rifles, the face of the lone rider was clearly defined; not droopy or melancholy now, but belligerent, aggressive, masterful, bawling orders and oaths in a truculent voice while his horse weaved up and down and right and left as the rider watched every incident in a hundred incidents.

"Jackson!" shouted the outraged Larry.

Jackson's horse pivoted around. Jackson leaned forward, peered at the trotting prisoner and wheeled away again, ignoring him.

"Hurry up!" bawled the rider. "Tom, pass the word for the hosses. Bill, grab them bags! One minute more! Up to the bank, all of you!"

Larry saw that the amazing Jackson held a six-shooter in his right hand and a watch in his left!

"And I fed and sheltered him so he could rob the town!" groaned Larry. "He got his gang together right under my nose!"

"Shut up!" advised the captor. "Hurry!"

A great hulking figure moved out from a shadowed porch beyond the dance-hall.

A flash of light zipped in front of Larry's eyes. Concussion made his ears ring; smoke stung his nostrils. The big figure came almost up to him and fired again. He was shooting at the horseman. The streaks of flame from his gun leaped past as Larry ducked.

Return shots came from three directions. The big fellow dodged.

"Ya-a-a!" he roared. "You think you'll git away without me, eh? You—"

An explosion burst behind Larry's spine.

The big fellow tumbled to his knees. Larry's captor fired again. The giant dropped his weapon and held out a hand, as if in supplication. But too late. He sank into the shadows alongside the porch.

"No brains!" gulped Larry's captor. "He never had any! Come on, you, hurry!"

Larry hastened up the steps, but he saw Jackson gallop to the victim, bringing his horse back on its hind legs.

"Who is it?" bawled Jackson.

"Bender," explained Larry's captor.

"Bender, eh? Fair enough. He wanted to boss the gang. Huh! The poor fool, he didn't have brains enough to know he didn't have any! Let him lie! Hurry up!"

Jackson raised his voice.

"Hosses are here! All through!"

A troop of led animals with empty saddles raced up the street. Men centered toward them. Larry noticed this out of the corner of his eyes; but he was rushed across the porch and past two guards with rifles.

HIS own guard shoved him into the lighted doorway. He blinked in the presence of men and women who were starting to recover their morale. Some were making sly remarks. Above them, standing on a piano, were two masked men with revolvers in their hands.

"Come on!" bawled the guards at the doorway. "Get past us!"

The pair on the piano leaped down and made for the door, holding vigilant pistols. They reached the threshold and began to run.

"You people keep inside for five minutes!" ordered the outside guard. "Otherwise you'll git hurt!"

The guard and his pal vanished. Their spurred boots clattered down the boardwalk.

"But why did they throw me out of jail?" wondered Larry aloud.

He stood in the front rank near the door, alongside a fat man and a woman with a hard face.

"Wasn't you a friend of that robber?" demanded the fat man.

"No friend of his!" roared a voice behind Larry. "I heard the robber talk to him once. Huh! No friend of his!"

"But why did they throw me out of jail?" persisted Larry.

"Cheer up," said some one. "You'll git back!"

The crowd began to laugh. So did Larry. Unstrung nerves made the laughter high-pitched and off the key.

"Let's get the constable out of jail," he suggested.

"How about the robbers?" demurred some one.

"They're gone."

"Who's got the keys to the jail?"

"The robbers, I guess. They took 'em off the constable."

"Well, how'll we git him out of jail?"

"Take it apart."

"Come on, then."

The enterprising male members of the crowd surged out of the doorway. They may have expected a shot, but the robbers had not lingered.

"They cleaned the bank!" bawled some one. "Look!"

"Where's our hosses?" demanded another.

There were no animals in sight.

"Gone!" blurted Larry. "Chased away, scared out, scattered all over creation!"

Ten men began to swear.

A light appeared in a saloon across the street. The scared proprietor walked behind the bar and fumbled for his cash-box. A customer came out from underneath the billiard table. Then another. The wide doorway showed them distinctly.

The crowd surged into the dirt road and started toward the jail, where loud yells informed them of the mental attitude of the prisoners. Larry found himself on the outskirts of the crowd, which was howling, laughing or swearing, according to the person.

Some one caught his elbow. He looked to his left. A silent little fellow, a stranger, drew him into a shadow alongside a pump. The stranger's low voice talked fast—

"Say, Bessie Fitzgerald's been kidnapped—"

"For heaven's sake!" exploded Larry. "What next?"

"S-s-s-sh! Listen! She's up in that old busted cabin among the trees, up in Wildcat Cañon. You take the main road for three miles and then take the old mine road to the right till you come to a gum tree, and then you take the path over the ridge."

"How do you know so much?"

"Never you mind. Better go alone. There's other fellows searchin' all over town for her."

"Of all the wild-eyed fool things I've heard tonight, this is the wildest. Say, who are you?"

"Never you mind. I'm tellin' you. Go alone and you'll have a chance. Take a mob and they'll rush her over the hills."

Larry could not believe it.

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"Never mind. I was one of the gang, see? They kidnapped her, see? I kept out of it—out of everything. See? I'm out of it. I'm tellin' you, that's all."

"You mean Jackson kidnapped her?"

"Jackson?"

"The leader. Fellow with the long mustache."

"Oh. Black Jack. Well, figure it out yourself."

"I'm beginning to," said Larry grimly. "You'd better come along."

"Not me. I'm out of it, see?"

"I'm not so sure. You might like to meet the constable."

The little man's hand swung toward his right hip.

"I'm doin' you a favor, mister," he snarled, backing away. "I've told you what to do. Now do it or go soak your head!"

The last four words were convincing. They sounded very like the official repartee of the whole gang. Larry moved forward, eager for more information, but the man slipped into the tag-end of the crowd and vanished.

"Well, I'm darned!" sighed Larry.

There were thumps and crashes down the street. The mob cheered. The calaboose was coming apart. Larry tried to see, but beyond the dark figures which milled around in front of the dark edifice there was nothing to observe.

Larry, excited and very much puzzled, wondered what to do. The stranger's information might be a trap, but to what purpose? Did Jackson want to meet him face to face? Hardly. Jackson had his own problems. What then? Larry didn't know. The whole thing was peculiar. If Jackson was traveling in a hurry—as he was—why should he kidnap a girl and keep her in an isolated mine cabin in the hills? Was he planning to go there later? Anyhow, was the girl kidnapped at all?

She was.

In a few minutes Larry discovered that in the milling mob there was a cross current of highly excited swains, running around in circles and wondering at the mysterious disappearance of the belle of the Southwestern Restaurant. That edifice was dark but the forebodings of the swains were even darker.

Curiosity, the greatest trap and the greatest developer of mankind, urged Larry to look into his mystery, so that shortly he sought a six-shooter and a horse. The pistol was easy to borrow. Horses were harder. He was forced to leave town on a wheezy old crow-bait which threatened to come apart at each uphill mile.

He found the old mine road and the trail over the hills. He left the horse in a cañon —the moon was up now—and climbed over a bare range and finally into a hillside gulch where a tiny light showed in a cluster of brush.

Walking cautiously, pistol in hand, he slipped through the brush until he reached the side of a ruined shanty where two horses munched grass. He slipped along the cracked wall-boards and peered over the ledge.

The mysterious informant had told the truth.

A CANDLE sputtered on a ruined table. Its jumping flame threw gold on the hair of Bessie Fitzgerald, sitting on a box with her hands tied and her big eyes rebellious and almost despairing. Opposite sat a complacent man with a thin, drawn face, leaning against the table, reading an old paper and smoking a corn-cob pipe. There was no conversation between them. Conversation had been finished long before.

"Well, can you beat that?" whimpered Larry.

He calculated swiftly. The door opened inward, but it might be locked. The window, then, was his best chance. Was there another guard? Apparently not.

He swung up his pistol. Suddenly he jabbed it through the dirty glass of the window, which fell with a crash. The man jumped.

"Up!" yelled Larry.

The man's hands elevated as he looked over his shoulder.

"Stand up! Walk backward to the window! I want your gun!"

The man, surprized, obeyed without argument. Larry took his pistol and debated whether to go in via the window or the door. He chose the window, knocking away the stray glass. Quickly he was inside.

Bessie arose, lips parted, eyes glad. She ran toward him.

"Larry!" she cried. "Larry."

Swiftly he unbound her wrists. She clung to him. He watched the other man and held the pistol-arm free, but he made her very welcome, so welcome that she flushed and at last laid her head upon his shoulder. He patted her, very gently, mumbling words that were reassuring though somewhat incoherent.

"But what's the idea of this?" he demanded, eyeing the culprit. "Have you fellows sunk so low that you have to kidnap a decent girl, drag her up to a place like this, keep her bound, scare her? What's the idea?"

"I dunno," retorted the culprit. "It was orders. You don't think I enjoyed it, do you?"

Larry's astonished mouth opened. The culprit continued:

"If you think it's any fun haulin' a husky girl all over creation when she don't want to come, try it yourself. Huh! If I hadn't had help, I'd never have gotten here!"

Larry noticed he was close to the window. He stepped away.

"How many more are there?" he demanded.

"Oh, they've gone."

The brow of the farmer from Illinois became very wrinkled. The man was lying, of course, and his easy manner gave Larry a depressing idea that perhaps he had come into a place which might be harder to leave. For all he knew there might be a ring of enemies outside. But why? What was the object of it all? Was Larry so important that Jackson found it worth while to capture him as well as the girl? He couldn't quite see it.

"There's a nigger in the woodpile somewhere!" he raged. "What's it all about?"

"Come outside," suggested the captive.

"No!" gasped Bessie. "It's a trap!"

"It's all a trap!" exploded Larry. "It's got me guessing. What's the motive?"

"Come outside," insisted the culprit. "Hold your gun to my head if you want, but come outside."

There was a long silence. The girl still clung to Larry, but he drew away.

"I will," he decided. "It's moonlight. I can see things. I'll blow his head off at the first sign of treachery! Come on!"

"No!" pleaded Bessie.

"Never fear. We've got to get out somehow. I'll pave the way. Come on, march!"

The man marched. The door closed, leaving an alarmed girl looking through the window.

The prisoner went through the brush for a short distance and then halted in front of a tree, facing the belligerent pistol. His voice was low and somewhat amused.

"I guess you're lucky, havin' a friend like Black Jack. Look at the trouble he's gone to for you!"

"Friend?" snorted Larry. "That scoundrel?"

"Scoundrel? Mebbe. But he knows his business, mister. He never forgets them he likes. He never moves till he's ready. Look at the way he slipped his gang into town, unsuspected. Look at the way he cleaned the town tonight. We used to have a boss that went off at half cock, but he didn't have any brains. Black Jack Wheeler's different. He figures everything out. Why, he even posed as an enemy of yours, so nobody could blame you when the crash came. See? Here's a letter."

The captive produced a tattered envelope. The astonished Larry took it, lowering his gun while the friendly bandit lit a match and held it over his shoulder. With very mixed feelings the farmer from Illinois read the most startling missive he had ever seen, written in a style which showed a smattering of education and nothing more.

Dear Larry:

Women likes romanticks so I kidnapped her so you could rescue her romantick so she would be gratefull to you, because women likes heroes which she thinks you are now. She will be a nice woman to take care of the kids.

They were my kids and my wife brought them to me but I dident want them but I had to take them because her tongue was terrible and she made me take her away from the gang and reform in a wagon but the clouburst drownded her and you took the kids and I am much obliged because a man like me can not have kids tagging around so I am much obliged because you are a good man and you and her will do the right thing by them and you will never see me again. Good luck to you.

Your friend
Ben Jackson
Black Jack Wheeler.

Larry crumpled the paper in the palm of his nerveless hand. His voice sounded far away.

"You mean you idiots dragged this girl up here so I could rescue her?"

"Yep, the boss ordered it."

"Didn't you realize her suffering?"

"Yep, but the boss ordered it."

"H'm. Well, shouldn't I have you arrested anyhow?"

"What for? I wasn't in the holdup. You've got the girl, haven't you?"

There was a long silence.

"Where is Black Jack?" demanded Larry.

"Gone back to Colorado. Mebbe Idaho. He's goin' to be hard to find."

Larry steadied himself against a tree trunk while his mind revolved in circles, striving to find something he could do about it. But the thing was too gorgeously complete. The more he thought of it, the more helpless he felt. The sad-eyed Jackson, scoundrel and bandit though he was, had given a gift which couldn't be dodged, even if Larry wanted to, which he didn't. He might arrest this sub-agent in front of him, of course. But Larry was human. He tossed up his hands.

"What's the use? I guess there's nothing more to say."

"Nope," agreed the genial bandit, "there aint."

There is a fine peach orchard and a big cattle ranch now at Oak Tree Creek. The babies, and other babies, have grown and gone their ways, educated men and women. The Honorable Lawrence J. McCall, thrice State Senator, tells this story sometimes when the winter months confine him to his front porch. But after the telling his wistful blue eyes rove toward the great plain and the distant purple mountains, as if he would like to renew the boisterous days of his youth and see again the melancholy face of the gaunt, old bald-headed rascal who was, in his own peculiar way, a friend.

MORGAN STINEMETZ

GOLD BRICK DAYS

by Faunce Rochester

THE early settlers in Massachusetts maintained their hold on the land by stirring up intertribal dissensions among the aborigines and because the plague reduced the powerful Wampanoags from some three thousand warriors to less than sixty fighting men shortly before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth. Massasoit, chief of the Wampanoags, was very friendly to the colonists from the first. Metacomet, his son, goes down in history as King Philp. The plague swept down the coast from Canada to Long Island Sound, destroying the Indians by thousands.

The Massachusetts tribe, once numbering several thousand, was reduced to a hundred. Its territory was Massachusetts Bay and the site of Boston. The most important period of New England's early history is from 1675 to 1760. Had not the plague so greatly reduced the tribes, the English could easily have been exterminated. The ambition of Louis the Great to dominate all of North America possibly might have become a fact.

But the plague destroyed by thousands. The powerful Narragansetts in Rhode Island melted away. Canonicus was their sachem and a warm friend to the colonists. It was Massasoit who brought Samoset, of Pemaquid, Maine, to Plymouth. These three chiefs were great men; not only great in war but because of their generosity to the first white men. Unlike the early Dutch on the Hudson the Massachusetts settlers did not endeavor to extinguish the Indian title to land to the Indian's satisfaction.

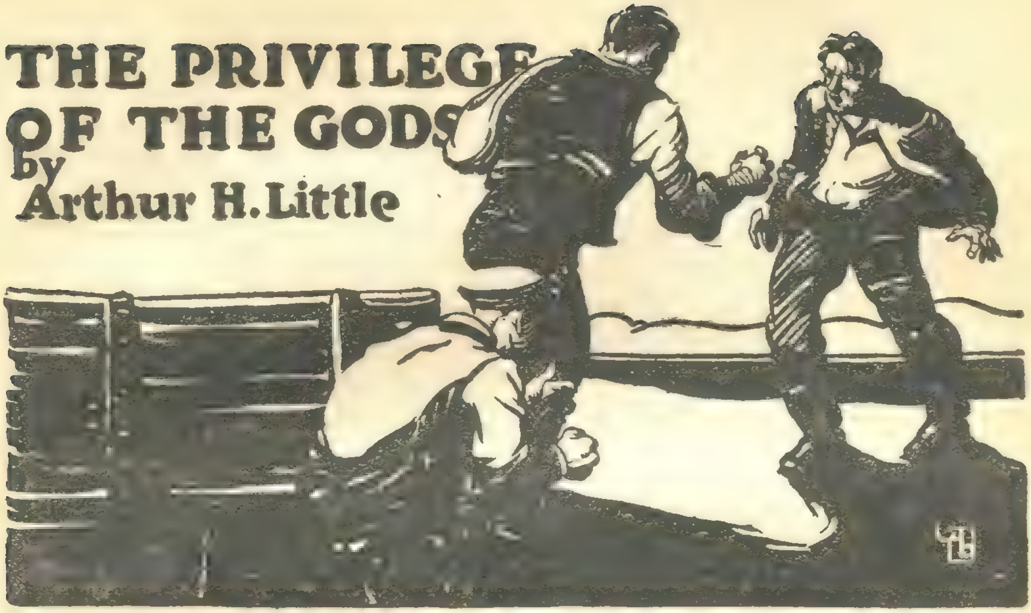
When the Indians realized their territory was to be consumed, they fought. But by treaties and presents and political shrewdness the settlers managed to set one tribe against another, or a combination of tribes, so that the Indian was always the loser. Treachery characterized the acts of the English. The French in Canada kept the trouble boiling by instigation and the powerful influence exerted by the Jesuits. Captain Hunt seized at Monhegan Island and sold into slavery twenty-four Indians who had treated him kindly. This was in 1614.

In 1524 Verrazano kidnapped a boy on the Connecticut coast. In 1535 Jacques Cartier repaid his kind host on the St. Lawrence, Donacona, a Huron chief, by stealing him and carrying him to France where he died. In 1605 Weymouth entered the Sagadahoc River and seized five Indians and carried them to England. In 1611 Captain Edward Harlow captured three Indians at Monhegan and two more at Chapawick —Martha's Vineyard. And so the tale runs.

It is refreshing to read how quickly the red man learned to read the white man, and how Epanow, one of the first Indians to be carried across the Atlantic, sold a gold brick to his jailors in England. In London he met two brother Indians, Assacumet and Wanape. Epanow was a clever cuss. He was curious to know why big ships were sailing across the ocean. He learned the English were as crazy as a Spaniard to find gold. He told them of an island off the coast of Cape Cod whose sands were composed of gold dust. Would he show the English? He would, if he could have his two friends along to help him. Their ship ultimately anchored in home waters. Then over the rail and a derisive farewell to their captors. Shortly after this the Pilgrims arrived and were treated quite decently, considering the reputation the English had won because of their kidnappings. Men were kidnapped in North America and sold as slaves long before aborigines from other countries were brought as slaves to America.

THE PRIVILEGE OF THE GODS

by Arthur H. Little



IT WAS on a Saturday afternoon in April when up the gangplank of the dredge *Continental* came the reddest head of hair I ever saw. Under the hair, in the six-foot space between it and the ground, was Bud Moody.

And he hadn't been aboard twenty minutes before he tangled with Fred Stanton.

A professional diver, this Stanton, known on every river front on the Great Lakes. Learned his trade on salt water. A bruiser, and big. Arms like a gorilla's; face like a fish-hawk's; reputation—well, never mind. A hard man, Stanton, hard outside and hard inside. A bad, bad man to tackle. But this young Bud Moody tackled him almost on sight.

Me, I didn't see the start. But I saw the finish.

This Moody person came aboard the dredge at a time when we weren't expecting company. We'd been digging concrete for the Southport Steel Company in Southport harbor. Our boss, Old Man Strang—he was the contractor on the job and the *Continental's* owner—had gone up over the river bank for a powwow with the Southport Steel, and Mr. Bartlett, our foreman, had gone with him. There'd been a lot of arguing about the dynamiting—steel company kept saying it wasn't safe—and the Old Man and Bartlett had gone up to the plant manager's office to see could they settle it. So we'd knocked off operations for the afternoon and everybody had gone ashore—all but Stanton and Hank, who was Stanton's tender, and me.

Me, I was down in the *Continental's* innards, persuading a stuffing-box with a spanner. Digging concrete, especially when you're digging it under four bells and a jingle, trying to finish one job in time to start another, and both jobs under a time limit—that's a kind of work that no white man's dredge ought to be asked to do; and she was strained here and there, and loose inside. Stanton and Hank, they were on deck on the river side, fussing with the diving dress.

And up the gangplank comes this red-headed Moody, looking for somebody. And he finds Stanton.

"Hullo," says Moody, "is the man in charge aboard?"

"No, he ain't," says Stanton. "But what of it?"

"I want to see him," says Moody, "because I want to learn to be a diver."

Stanton laughs, not pretty, and says:

"Well, you sure came to the right place. If you want to start right away we'll give you a try-out."

So the two of them, Stanton and Hank they belt and bolt this Moody into the dress and strap on the lead-soled shoes and screw on the helmet. Then Stanton says:

"All right, now, walk out to the edge.

And when you hear me slap you on the helmet, just step off."

Hank starts the pump and Stanton screws on the face-plate and slaps the helmet. They're standing at the edge now—a dredge has no rail—and Moody steps off.

There's a drop of maybe three feet through the air, and then he hits the water feet first, shooting down like a sounding lead. I know how it feels. When the water closes over the escape-valve in the helmet, you hear a noise like this—*thung-g-g!* That's the pressure hitting your ears. Everything's queer. You can hear the air-pump, breathing-like. As you drop, you squint out through the glass bull's-eyes in the helmet, but in river water you can't see anything much but half-lighted fog. And before you know it you touch bottom.

Well, this Moody goes down, and for a couple of minutes all that you can see of him are the life-line and air-hose and the bubbles rising from his helmet. And then, just about as fast as he went down, he comes up, floating. Kicking, helpless, on the surface.

Then, up the gangplank come Old Man Strang and Bartlett, and things happened.

"Pull him in," says the Old Man.

Stanton and Hank pull him in.

"Help him up the ladder," says the Old Man, "and get that face-plate and helmet off him quick."

Me, I've come on deck and I lend a hand. We unscrew the face-plate and twist off the helmet. Moody's face is the color of Portland cement, but there's a funny look in his eyes—fire, like the fire in his hair.

We strip off the shoes and the diving-dress and he stands up. Doesn't say a word. He just swings around, quick as a cat, and gets Stanton—gets him by the shirt-front with one hand and just behind the knees with the other, and then swings him with a heave toward the river and lets go. *Splash!* That's Stanton.

"Well," says the Old Man, "would you drown my diver?"

The Old Man's just a little fellow, you know, and sort of stooped. Wears a beard. Doesn't talk much, but when he speaks you know he's boss.

"But," says Moody, turning on him, "that's what he tried to do to me! Whatever he did, he did it purposely."

"Yes," says the Old Man, "it was deliberate. They left off the chest-weight and the back-weight and screwed down the escape-valve. Then when they speeded up the pump, the air in the suit did the rest. It's an old trick—a joke, so considered. It's dangerous. But it doesn't justify murder. Revenge, you know, is the privilege of the gods."

Well, by this time Stanton has swum to the ladder and is climbing up, spitting water, and the Old Man turns to him.

"Mr. Stanton," he says, "I hope this will be a lesson to you. But in case the lesson doesn't stick, remember this: On my work, practical joking is forbidden. Human life is too precious for foolery. Besides, we've no time to play. Hereafter, the man who plays a practical joke is fired. Do you understand, Mr. Stanton?"

Stanton grunts and stamps into the cabin, and the Old Man says to Moody—

"How did you happen to be aboard?"

"I came here to find work," says Moody. "I'd like to learn—that is, I'd like to work on the river."

"Well," says the Old Man, sort of experimenting with a smile, "maybe we can use you. Your work will not consist, to any great extent, of tossing men overboard. But Mr. Bartlett tells me that he needs a general utility man. If you want the job, report here aboard the dredge Monday morning—six-thirty."

And that was how this red-head signed up with us on the *Continental.* If he was looking for work, he sure found it. Right from the start he was too busy to practise any more diving. Because it was drive, drive, drive, six long days a week. And the old *Continental* sputtered steam out of leaky joints and spattered oil on me and dug concrete by the ton.

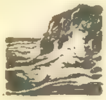
The Old Man, you see, had gambled three ways. Up on the bank, the Southport Steel's construction men had planted a new powerhouse, planted it on a whale of a concrete base. With the brick work half done, the river bank had caved from under and the whole works had toppled down the bluff and into the channel. The steel company had called in Old Man Strang and he'd looked the job over and figured a little and told them:

"I can clear the channel by June fifteenth."

"To provide an incentive," proposed the steel company, whose ore boats couldn't get to the ore docks while the channel was half full of concrete, "suppose we pay you a bonus if you finish ahead of the fifteenth and charge you a penalty if you run beyond it. A thousand dollars a day either way."

"Suits me," said the Old Man. "Write it into the contract."

Which, if you ask me, was triple-expansion nerve. We'd been all set, you see, to drydock the *Continental* and overhaul her. And Lord knows, she needed it in preparation for a half-million-dollar dredging job in Sandusky Bay. In the competitive bidding for the Sandusky work the Old Man had under-cut Filmore and Briggs of Detroit by sixty-five thousand dollars, and then signed his name to the dotted line and bound himself to start the dredging work on or before August first. Failure to start by that date, so the agreement read, would void the contract.



AND then along came the Southport Steel with half a river full of concrete—this was in April—and the Old Man said to me:

"Blackie, we've figured that to overhaul the *Continental* would take two months. If we double-shift the job we can do it in half that time. We'll take this Southport Steel work, clean it up by the middle of June, then dock the *Continental*, overhaul her—yes, including her engines—and still have a half-month leeway before we're to start dredging at Sandusky."

So, instead of docking her, we'd taken the *Continental* up-river, along with a big derrick scow and the tug *True* and half a ton or so of dynamite, and tied into that concrete. It was just a week or so after we'd started the job that we acquired Bud Moody. And what he stepped into wasn't any picnic.

Concrete, especially when it's reinforced with railroad rails and under sixteen to twenty feet of water, is wicked stuff. We'd punch a few holes in it with an air-drill, and Stanton would go down and tamp the holes with dynamite and hook them up to the firing-wires. Then we'd work the whole outfit back a couple hundred feet, and Mr. Bartlett would fire the shots with a plunger generator.

B-o-o-o-m! Up from the river would rise a flock of waterspouts, as high as the *Continental's* second deck; and they'd spread their tops in the air and fall like rain. Then we'd move ahead and the *Continental* would scoop shattered concrete off the river bottom with her battered old dipper and heave it to the deck of the derrick scow.

Well, we drilled and tamped and blasted and scooped concrete all through April; and Mr. Bartlett marked off the days on a calendar. Old Man Strang had estimated the job so closely that he'd set up a daily schedule; and every day he and Bartlett checked the work done against the elapsed time. By the fifth of May we were twelve days ahead.

But we'd had our troubles. Every little while some Southport Steel official would come down the bank, watch our waterspouts a while, and then come aboard and say:

"Mr. Strang, we're afraid it isn't safe. Your blasts are too heavy. If there's an accident, you know, the steel company will be jointly liable."

And the Old Man would shake his head and say:

"As I've told you before, safety on work like this depends on vigilance. These men of mine are careful. We've worked with dynamite for years and never had an accident. Besides, as I've told you, no other method is practical. If we cut down the loads we can't shatter that concrete."

And so we plugged ahead and, in spite of jumpy steel officials, we were steamboating right nicely, thank you.

Bud Moody? Well, he was funny. Most of the time he went without a hat. Too busy to bother with it, I guess. And the sun spotted him with freckles that shone through the grease on him and looked as big as half-inch bolts. He worked, worked as hard as the old *Continental* herself, and he was, I think, perfectly happy.

"Blackie," he'd say to me, "this is like a circus, ain't it?"

"Meaning," I'd say, "what part of it?"

"Why, just being here on the river. Honestly, it don't seem like work—not to me. Maybe it's because ever since I can remember I've wanted to be down here. You know, the—that is, the romance. There's so much going on!" And he'd warm up to it and seem to get about half mad. "Tugs! Red harbor tugs, busy as the deuce, each one with a frothy little bone in her teeth, hurrying along somewhere on some important business, maybe to bury the bone! Fish tugs—long, slim, white ones, slipping into port when the sun is going down. And the big fellows, the freighters—gosh, Blackie, don't you get a kick out of watching them? Big and long and black, coming in with ore, with their skippers on the bridges, scowling down over the side. The big fellows, when they go out, loaded down to twenty feet with coal, and you can hear 'em growl outside when they drop the harbor tug and pick up the course to Superior. Gee, Blackie, don't you like the smell of hot oil!"

And I'd say to him—

"Buddie, when you've inhaled as much Six-Hundred-W as I have, you'll cease to regard it as perfume."

But he'd only shake his head as if I was hopeless. As I say, he was funny. Maybe it was the red hair.

Stanton, now—well, Stanton was different. Nothing in the line of romance ever warmed him up. Not any more than you can warm up a carp. He'd close-set eyes, that Stanton, and they never aimed long in one place. To most of us he talked in grunts. Of course, he was a diver, a high-paid aristocrat, if you get what I mean, and maybe he looked down on us. But the only time he ever opened up was when Bud Moody was near; and then what he had to say was sarcasm.

"Diver, eh?" he'd say. "Goin' to be a diver! Well, listen, Red, before you do any more divin', you wait till you're man enough to hold a suit down."

Bud, he'd bite his lip and keep mum. On the subject of Stanton he was a clam. Never even talked to me about him, except once. And that was sort of queer.

"Blackie," he said to me—we were taking up a steam joint and he was holding a wrench on a hot flange-bolt—"jevver have hunches?"

"Some," I said. The wrench slipped, and he was busy a minute; then he said, "Do you know much about Stanton's past record?"

"No," I said. Then he changed hands on the wrench and asked me—

"Well, say, if our outfit should default on that Sandusky job, what'd happen?"

"Probably it'd go to Filmore and Briggs," I said. "But what's that got to do with Stanton?"

But he grinned a little, shook his head, and wouldn't answer.

Well, we pounded ahead and walloped that concrete with dynamite into the early part of May. We'd cleaned it up, all except two big blocks of it, each about half the size of the *Continental's* old steel hull. And on May the tenth Mr. Bartlett said to Old Man Strang:

"Chief, I'm satisfied that we've got her licked. Nothing can stop us now. We'll finish within the time limit, easy."

And on the afternoon of that same day, the dynamite hauled off and turned the tables and walloped us.

Here's how: The plunger-generator uncorked a short-circuit, and Mr. Bartlett howled for me. I unhooked the firing wires and led them into the cabin. At the *Continental's* dynamo I rigged a hurry-up switch. Then I said to Bud Moody—

"Bud, you stand there in the doorway, and when Mr. Bartlett gives the word to shoot, you pass it on to me."

"Gotcha," said Bud.

Out forward there was the usual bustle just before a shot. Alongside the dredge was the scow-boat, and in it Stanton and his tender, Hank. Stanton had just loaded three shots, one ahead of the other—the last for the day. Our anchors were up, ready to move back into the clear. Me, I was out of sight and out of earshot of what was going on. And Bud Moody, standing in the doorway, could just see forward, past the corner of the cabin to where Mr. Bartlett stood on the dipper-man's platform, ready to give the word.

And right at that minute—I got the particulars later—out from the river bank and heading across the *Continental's* bow, came a rowboat, and in the rowboat was the Southport Steel's chief engineer, a skinny, puttering old bozo named Ferguson. He wasn't what you'd call a navigator, that chief engineer, and the rowboat, I know, must have yawed and crawfished right considerable.

Bartlett, seeing the boat, jumped from the dipper-man's platform and ran to the starboard side to warn it away. And, of course, he passed out of the view of Bud Moody.

Me, I was waiting there at the switch, watching Bud—it was hot in that steel cabin—and wondering what the Sam Hill. I yelled at Bud

"Come on! Let's go!"

And Bud, as much in the dark as I was, looked at Stanton in the scow-boat alongside. Stanton could see forward.

Stanton, watching, raised a hand and said—

"Wait!"

This was a part, too, that I found out later. Then in a minute he dropped his hand, looked at Bud and nodded.

"Shoot," said Bud.

And I closed the switch.

The effect was one bear-cat of a commotion. The *Continental* lurched fit to jerk your head off and around her forward end the river boiled like fury. But out ahead of her, fifty feet or so, was where the real ruckus was. Two waterspouts rose. On the top of the nearest one was a rowboat. And in the rowboat was the Southport Steel's chief engineer.

The rowboat seemed to hang motionless, six feet or so in the air. And then it upended and dove.

WELL, we fished the engineer out, fished him out with a heaving-line. And on the *Continental's* deck he stamped the water out of his shoes and blazed at Old Man Strang.

"Now, sir," he said, "you'll stop! As the authorized representative of the Southport Steel Company, I order you to cease operations. I am going now to report to the president. If you care to do so, you may go with me and hear what I have to say."

And up the bank the two of them went.

Bud Moody, his mouth half open and his freckles flaring, watched them as they climbed and as they disappeared over the top. And then he took after them. Remembering that red hair, I yelled—

"Hey, where're you going?"

But he only waved an arm aloft and climbed. Me, I turned to the foreman and said—

" 'Scuse me, Mr. Bartlett—company business."

And I lighted out after Bud.

Now that boy could travel. No good trying to catch him with speed. So I checked him down with three whistles and brought him up standing, but looking stubborn.

"Listen," I said to him, when my breath had come back, "are you cuckoo? What's the idea o' chasing that poor old engineer? Ain't he had rough-house enough for one afternoon? Come on back where you belong!"

"No," he said, "I ain't going back. I got business up here. Where's the president's office, do you know?"

"No," I said, "I don't. But if you're going somewhere, I better trail along and look after you and the general public. Lead on."

By that time, of course, Old Man Strang and that long-legged engineer had disappeared among the buildings up there and we'd lost the trail. Finding the president's office in a steel mill, especially when you start at the back end the way we did, is a job for a detective or an explorer. We'd ask gang bosses and foremen and superintendents; and most of them couldn't hear very well on account of the racket, and they'd wave at some point nor'east by east. But finally we picked up the slate roof of a big office building and laid a course for that; and then we cruised a couple of miles of corridors and fetched up at last at a big red desk in a big red room and behind the desk was a square-rigged young woman with a red necktie on who wanted to know if we had an appointment.

"Yes'm," said Bud, lying very promptly, "we both have."

And when she got up from her desk and went through a door marked "President," Bud, stepping soft-like, walked through right behind her. And me, I walked through behind Bud. And there we were.

Inside there was a brown table as big as a hatch on a Steel Trust freighter, and sitting behind the table was a fellow that looked like General Pershing in civies. On the opposite side of the table, his hat in his hand, sat Old Man Strang, and at the end, badly wrinkled and still dripping a little, the chief engineer. As we stepped in, General Pershing was speaking.

"Yes, Mr. Strang," he was saying, "as Mr. Ferguson says, you'd been warned, and by several of our people. It appears that you, personally, were responsible. You've just heard Mr. Ferguson say that, on one occasion when you were absent, he talked with your diver, Stanton, and that Stanton, who ought to know, said that the shots all were being loaded too heavily for safety, but that he was obeying your orders."

Stanton again!

"And so," General Pershing went on, "it seems that you've ignored the judgment of other men and taken the responsibility upon yourself. You've refused to listen to reason. I dislike to be so blunt, but there's nothing that I can do but uphold Mr. Ferguson and order you to stop work—at least until our engineering department can make some blasting tests of our own. We have the right, you know, to dictate precautions for safety. Meanwhile, we shall be obliged to hold you to the contract. The time limit matter is something that, if necessary, can be settled in the courts."

And then Bud Moody, the redhead, spoke up. And three pairs of eyes turned on him.

"No," he said, "that isn't so. 'Scuse me, Mr. President, but you're mistaken. Mr. Strang isn't to blame. I am. I was the only inexperienced man aboard. The others are old hands and careful. I saw that rowboat, and knew it was in range and gave the word to shoot. I thought it would be a joke to see the boat stand on its head. I'd heard Mr. Strang say that any man who fooled would be fired—that life was too precious. But I didn't care. I—I disobeyed."

Dumfounded, I blurted out—

"But Bud—"

But he whirled on me and said—

"Shut up, you!" Then to Mr. Strang, "And so, sir, to save you the trouble of firing me, I'm quitting."

And then, having spoken his piece, he turned on his heel, with his back straight like a soldier's, and marched out. I followed, overhauled him—he was heading back toward the river—and footed it alongside.

"There was a guy in a Spanish book," I said, "that got him a horse and a spear and went out and rassled windmills."

"Yeh," he said.

"Yeh," I said, "but compared with you, that bozo was a Solomon, you red-headed woodpecker. Me, I don't know yet just what happened on that last blast; but I do know that what you told 'em in there just now sounded to me like a high class fairy tale. And then, before anybody can say a word, you haul off and quit."

"Yeh," he said, stepping it off and not even bothering to look at me, "I had to quit to make it good."

By that time we'd reached the river bank.

And what we saw below knocked our conversation for a battery of burnt-out boilers. We stood there with our mouths open and looked, and then we both sat down, suddenlike, on the ground and looked some more.

How long we sat there looking I don't know; but we just sat and looked and couldn't say a word. Then, behind us we heard voices. Old Man Strang and the long-legged engineer were coming.

"Well, boys," the Old Man spoke up, "they've changed—"

And then he'd reached the river bank, too, and he saw what we saw.

Below us, at the edge of the river, stood a little knot of men. In the center, bareheaded and gray, was Mr. Bartlett. And out in the river, forty feet or so, the old *Continental*. But all that we could see of her were her upper house, her three anchor columns and the tops of her boom and A-frame.

Sunk! Sunk in twenty feet of water and sitting on the river bottom there, along with what was left of that damnable concrete.

We went down the bank, the four of us. Half way down we met Mr. Bartlett. His eyes were misty.

"Chief," he said, "she went down in less than five minutes. Hull caved in forward by that blast. It hit her before she was clear. After you'd gone up the bank I noticed that she seemed to be settling—her anchors were up—and I went below and found water coming in forward. She lurched, and I had to climb for my life. The other men went over the side. And—well, there she is."

"Is everybody safe?" the Old Man asked.

"Yes," said Bartlett, "all accounted for."

"Well, then," the Old Man said, "we'll raise her."

If the days had been long and hard before they were longer and harder now. Down at the Strang shipyard below the Nickle Plate bridge we slapped together a cofferdam, a high fence of a thing of timber and sheathing, with one end partly open to fit around her boom and dipper-arm. We swung it aboard a flat-scow, took it up to the *Continental*, weighted it with railroad iron and sank the bottom edge of it to her deck. Then we planked in the space between the cofferdam and her forward gear.

And Bud Moody, he that had resigned in the office of the steel company's president, he sat up on the bank by a lumber pile and watched us from under his red, red hair. I don't believe that the Old Man noticed him, for the bank was lined with others that watched us just out of curiosity. Besides, the Old Man was busy.

Stanton went below with an air-drill, and we lowered four long lengths of one-inch chain to him and he made the corners of the cofferdam fast to the *Continental*. Then he patched four forward hull-plates with concrete and burlap and planks; and while he was doing that I rigged four eight-inch pumps and set them spinning.

Yellow water boiled from the pump outlets. Inside the cofferdam the water level dropped a foot, two feet, three, four, and on down to eight. And there Old Man Strang stopped the pumps. The cofferdam was springing inward—water pressure on the outside—and the seams in the sheathing were opening. We braced her and pumped again. Down went the water inside, and our bracing buckled and whipped loose. But the *Continental* didn't budge.

And up on the bank, under his blazing thatch, Bud Moody looked on. Once, I beckoned to him to come down. But he shook his head.

We braced again and pumped her down to nine feet, then ten. And a six-foot section of the cofferdam alongside the boom burst inward.

"Stanton," said Old Man Strang, "you're sure that she isn't jammed below?"

"You went around her with a sounding pole, didn't you?" Stanton said.

Then two days more of it to patch the sheathing, and when we pumped again the patch let go. There she lay in the mud—never a move or so much as a quiver.

ON THE night of the eighth day of that I met Bud Moody uptown by accident, and we shot a game of pool. Bud was restless.

"What's eating you?" I asked him.

"The same thing that's eating you," he said, "the *Continental*. Let's go down there."

On the way down he said to me:

"Blackie, have you tried to dope this thing out? Well, figure it for yourself. Her hull draws, say, seven feet. She's flat, you know, and wide. Well, when you pump that cofferdam down to around nine feet or ten, you're lifting on her with a force more than equal to the natural lift of her hull, ain't you?"

"Maybe so," I said.

"Yeh," said Bud. "But she doesn't come up. What's the answer?"

"Bud," I said, "I'm just a dredge engineer, not Mr. Einstein."

Well, by that time we'd reached the river. It was a clear night, with about half a moon. Bud and I sat down in the shadow of a lumber pile. Below us, in water over her ears, was the *Continental*.

"Of course," Bud said, "what's holding her down might be the suction against the bottom. That's something that— But what the ——?"

On the upper works of the *Continental* a figure was moving. Funny looking. Slipping around here and there. Just wrong—all wrong. Then out along the cofferdam to the scow-boat and into the scow-boat, and *creak! creak! creak!* with the sculling oar—to the river bank; and then out of the boat and up the bank.

"Sit still!" Bud whispered. "Ain't seen us yet."

Whoever he was, he was passing us on the side nearest Bud. When he'd come up abreast of where we sat, the redhead alongside me uprose, took two long steps and then dived for a football tackle around the knees. Me, I didn't have time to blink.

There was a grunt, then a thump, then a dusty mix-up in the gravel—and Bud was on top, sitting straddle of the back of a man who lay on his face. Bud, I could see, was nursing a hammerlock. Then the man on the ground spoke. The voice was Stanton's. And what he said was this:

"All right, Hank, you've got me. But why the rough stuff? You knew you'd get your share."

We-l-l. From that point on, Mr. Stanton, on his stomach, talked quite a lot. What helped matters along was partly the hammerlock and partly Hank. Yes, Hank himself. Hank, you see, had found him a blind pig up an alley off Erie Avenue, uptown, and in there he'd got himself all oiled up and inspired. And then he'd set out to trail Stanton, because Stanton, as Hank had figured it out, was doing him dirt. Well, right in the midst of our little party by the lumber pile, Hank came steaming along, as usual a little late, but present. And finding matters all arranged to his liking, Hank sat in on the talk-fest and helped out with a few suggestions.

"Yeh," Hank said, after he'd settled himself comfortably, "he's a nice little playmate, that double-crosser. While you've got him there, ask him about that last shot o' dynamite."

Sort of punctuating his remarks with the hammerlock, Bud asked, and Stanton, hampered a little by the gravel, explained.

"Yeh," Hank said, "and ask him why he did it. Ask him about the check every month."

Again Mr. Stanton explained.

"Ask him," Hank said, "about them chains at the corners o' the cofferdam."

"They're looped," said Stanton, "looped around the reinforcing in the concrete."

And right there we organized a little expedition. Me, I went down the bank and got two heaving-lines and we wrapped Mr. Stanton like a mummy and carried him down to the cabin of the derrick scow and shut him in.

"Now," said Bud to Hank, "would you like to stay in there with him or would you rather be with us and play nice? All right. Get out that diving-suit and put it on me. We're going to do a little amateur and unofficial diving by moonlight."

Bud stripped to his underwear and Hank and I, we harnessed him in. Then with me manning the pump and a spanner handy-by in case Hank should change his mind or go to sleep—he was standing tender—we eased Bud down a ladder and out of sight into water that looked like ink.

He was down quite a while—long enough, anyway, to worry a fellow, and no sign of him except the air-bubbles, and then he came up.

Hank twisted off the face-plate, and Bud said:

"Chained down is right! Blackie, get me four sticks of dynamite and hook 'em up. Maybe we're going to blow the cofferdam clean off her, but we'll try something."

I rigged the four sticks with caps and firing-wires. Down went Bud again—four times, once at each corner of the *Continental*. Then he came up and said—

"All right, Blackie, give her the juice."

I'd hooked the firing-wires to the dynamo on the derrick-scow, and I gave her the current.

Thur-r-r-rump! Like that. At the corners four eddies boiled up. But the cofferdam stood.

"Now," said Bud, "start the pumps and we'll see what happens."

I climbed into the cofferdam and opened four steam valves, and the pumps began to spin. Inside the cofferdam the water level dropped two feet, three, four, six, eight, nine—

The cofferdam bracing began to crunch. Bud was talking to himself.

"In a minute," he said, "she's gotta come or—"

Nine and a half—

The end of a cross-brace squealed and shifted upward an inch, and I slammed at it with a sledge. The sides of the cofferdam were bowing inward.

Ten, ten and a half—

And the *Continental* seemed to shiver.

"When she comes," said Bud, "she'll come in a hurry."

And she came!

Up she came with a shudder and a surge, all ungainly in her great box of a cofferdam, all patched and scarred and muddy, but afloat.

Me, I ain't excitable, usually. But I shinned down the outside of that cofferdam, hopped to the derrick-scow and pulled down the whistle-cord and held it. Up on the bank in the steel company's yards a switch-engine squealed back at us, and down-river somewhere a harbor-tug chimed in, and then another and another and finally a couple of freighters and a yowling sand-sucker.

With the chorus going good, I beat it, climbed the bank and sprinted to a telephone.

"Yes," said Old Man Strang, on the other end of the line, "I hear the whistling. What's happened."

"The *Continental*," I said, "she's up. Yes, sir, up—afloat! She's been raised by a red-head, an engineer and a drunk. Coming down? Yes, sir, we'll be here."

Bud and Hank and I met the Old Man at the top of the bank. He'd forgotten his hat, but he was full of questions. Bud and I answered in chunks.

"Yes, yes," he said, turning to Bud. "Most of it is clear. Stanton, you say, was getting five hundred a month from Filmore and Briggs to delay us. He overloaded one hole in that last shot of dynamite. And he chained her corners to the concrete. But what did you do—what did you do with dynamite?"

"Oh," said Bud. "Well, you see, the strain had set those chains so I couldn't budge 'em. And so I sort of felt around—it was dark down there, you know—and tucked the dynamite between the chains and the concrete. And then the blasts, why they knocked the loops off the reinforcing."

"Ahem," the Old Man said. "And one more point. What did you do with Stanton?"

"Well," Bud answered, "we didn't hurt him. He's in the cabin of the derrick scow, sort of waiting for you. Came down here tonight because he couldn't keep away, I suppose. No, sir, we didn't hurt him. Anyway, not much. You see, sir, we remembered what you said about revenge being the privilege of the gods."

"I see," the Old Man said. "Well, I shan't want Stanton, although perhaps the law will. And now, if I may be personal, I suggest that you put on your pants."

YES, we cleaned up the steel company's concrete — worked double-shift to do it, though—and finished five days ahead of the limit. The Old Man split the bonus money—half to the crew and the other half to Bud Moody. We docked the *Continental* and overhauled her. And on August first, according to contract, she planted her anchors in the shale of Sandusky Bay. Out on the starboard deck that day on a little stool sat our new diver, overhauling his gear. A diver with freckles on him as big as half-inch bolts and the reddest head of hair I ever saw.

ROVERS THREE

A Two-Part Story
Part One

by
J·Allan Dunn

Author of "The Three Traders," "Thieves' Honor," etc.

CHAPTER I

THE GAEL

THE schooner went slashing through the shallow seas that lay like an outspread peacock's tail between Guadalcanal and Malaita—jade green here and emerald there; purple-brown where the mushroom coral patches came close to the treacherous surface; sapphire and violet in the deeper channel—with an insolence that was superb. The Yap native at the wheel grinned as the squall swept out from Susu Point, struck her just abaft the beam and put her starboard lee rail under until the water lipped above it.

There was no chance in that narrow water-trail to luff or to handle sheet. The knife-like reefs were so close that they showed on either rail like cloud shadows, within a biscuit's toss. The canvas was stiff as boards and the *Mbelema,* sixty feet over all, was making a third of her own length every second, twenty times her length every minute. The squall was a hazard that had to be accepted as she ran the gantlet of the reefs.

Kiyuku's bare feet gripped the deck, his calves swelled, the muscles in his shoulders writhed and those in his arms corded and shifted as he set his strength to the spokes, setting rudder and keel against the drumming sails and the spiteful wind; gauging all with precise nicety, gleeful at the chance to use his skill.

The summit of Mount Lammas, eight thousand feet above, was suddenly shrouded in gray vapor that stretched out tenuous films down the ravines while the bush-forest changed suddenly from green to black as the sun was veiled. The angry trade wind, pouring through a gap in the crater, shaped like the miter of a bishop, tore the mist in scarves, caught up with it and herded it together again, chasing it down the steep pitches in a flurry of rain that rattled like bird-shot on the leaves, spattered the lagoon and exhausted itself before it reached the schooner—dying like a dolphin, in a glamor of opalescence as the sun flashed out again and bridged the last drops into a rainbow.

An *aku* shot high into the air, a living bar of azure and silver. A frigate bird soared slantingly, disdainful of the gale. Now Malaita was in shadow, Guadalcanal in brilliant light, Mount Lammas sharp against a turqoise field; the bush, a medley of harsh greens spotted with shadows from the flying clouds that checkered sea and land; the beach, a glare of white against the mangroves, black masses of loose lava lying at high water mark like outhauled sea monsters, the barrier reef spouting and roaring in geysers and cataracts of ivory and chrysoprase. Bauro and its outlying islets rose ahead like an enormous purple whale that had fostered all the calves of the pod in some excess of maternal instinct like an over-broody hen. Now the great mass seemed luminous, now opaque. Under the bright sun the fleecy clouds that fled before the wind that broomed the forest, thrashed the shallows and whipped the deeper, heavier water. The scene varied constantly in a wild panorama of light and shade and hue.

Beyond Bauro lay the open sea, a straight-away course between the Santa Cruz Islands and the New Hebrides, skirting the Torres' and the Banks' scattering groups, on to Fiji and to Ovalau Island where Levuka, deposed capital of the Fijis, still proudly displays itself with the main street running along the shore, white bungalows scattered up and down the mountain side where the torrents race down in silvery spray, shining through the dense forest and the waving palms.

Levuka was to Kiyuku and his fellows of the crew as Paris to the Breton peasant, a distant Carcassonne to which he had never hoped to attain until he had shipped on the *Mbelema* under *kapitani* Makalini, whose native name in Tokelau—which is the Esperanto of the western archipelagoes—was Tataneliuaitu, The Man Who Is Familiar with Devils.

Tataneliuaitu, alias Makalini, by right of christening Gavin McLean, was taking a well-earned cat nap in his bunk, confident in the ability of Kiyuku to handle the schooner. McLean had been on deck the night before from dark till dawn, running through the treacherous strait between Ysabel and New Georgia, among snarling reefs in dirty weather, of which the present half-gale was a mild pretender. It was hot for all the breeze, and he lay mother-naked on his back, automatically wedged with knee and elbow to the lift and lunge, the pitch and roll of the schooner—sleeping placidly as a babe in arms. His red poll shone with the hue of anvil-iron in the sun spot that now and then flashed through the port; there was a glaze of sweat on his body that showed off its compact symmetry, and it was curiously piebald, dark-coppered with exposure on face and neck, throat and upper chest, on arms and legs up to the ankles, a lighter bronze elsewhere, and milky, satin-white about his loins and armpits. There was a bracelet of *tatu* in indigo about his left wrist, done by a Fiji *moku*-man. The thump of the waves on the bows, the hiss of them along the schooner's sweet entry and run, the whistle and scream of the wind, the drum of it in the canvas was lullaby to this stocky, blue-eyed, prow-nosed, tight-lipped, long-eared Gael, son of a Fifeshire solicitor, with the strain of some Red Danish ancestor strong within him; a romancer who never told a lie, who saw visions and braked them by the application of cold facts. Scotch caution spurred into action by the spirit of his viking forebear. A poet tied to an adding machine. A professor of peaceful methods and a fighter without fear or feeling. Explorer, breaker of trails, pearl sheller, copra trader, recruiter. Cautious of cash and prodigal of friendship.

Such was McLean, the son of McLean, the fourteenth Gavin McLean in direct succession, dreeing his own weird in savage places.

He had no white mate aboard the schooner. He had been hunting down a rumor of a patch of black-edged pearl-shell in the Rubiana Lagoon, and he had shipped Yaps for the purpose, knowing them to be excellent divers and first class fighters, the latter qualification essential as the former in the lagoon, headquarters of the most powerful of all the head-hunting tribes of the Solomons, the terror of the group in their raids; nominally submissive to the government at Gizu, but primitive as ever with an undiminished appetite for long pig, a fine taste in the collection and preservation of human heads.

The shell he had found only to discover it worm-drilled. It was part of the luck of the game and McLean took it philosophically, though it reduced his working capital, depleted by several recent misfortunes, to a minimum. The schooner was his, without lien or plaster. His credit was good at Levuka or Suva. Nevertheless he was in a situation that irked the Scotch side of him and secretly delighted the more reckless and subconscious Dane. It was only under excitement that the influence of the latter assumed control. Then McLean was apt to go berserk.

Now he had little more than enough to pay off his men and no prospect of profit that was at all rose-tinged. The independent trader was fast losing out these days. The big companies since the post-war mandates, that covered all things that grew and lived on the land or in the sea, were rapidly securing charters. Concessions were harder and harder to get and the price of produce was controlled by what practically amounted to a trust.

True, he had a tentative offer to tie up with an exploring expedition into the newly acquired British territory in northeastern Papua, but he had done that sort of thing before and was not anxious to repeat it. It meant going in ahead to make arrangements for transport, staying in behind to clean up everything and playing wet-nurse to a lot of touchy scientists and moving picture men, who were most of them tenderfeet in the bush and prone to blame everything that annoyed them—from leeches in the swamps to unfriendly receptions in the hill—on the unfortunate guide, while claiming all the credits of discovery.

Not that Gavin McLean cared for credit as the world sees that commodity. He settled matters with his own conscience and, as long as he felt self-stabilised, did not bother much what others thought of him. There were quirks of conceit in him, as there are in every Scot. He went so far as to judge his friends by their opinion of his own conduct.

THE afternoon wore on, the *Mbelema* sliding steadily along at her twelve knots, sped by wind and helped by current along the northern coast of Bauro, holding between Sutulahia Isle and the mainland that lay mysterious, silent, without even wisp of smoke. It was certain, though, that scores of sullen tribesmen watched the schooner's progress, resentful ever of the white man's presence, hoping that something might happen, that the vessel might strike one of the reefs that were as thick as the teeth of a comb.

Then the conches would *boo* and, from unguessed openings in the mangroves that masked the creeks, there would come gliding the splendid Solomon canoes without outriggers, elaborately and carefully built of thin planks fastened rigidly with knotted sinnet and coated with black tree lacquer so that its skin was as smooth as that of a fish; exquisitely modeled with curving stems and sterns, inset with pearl designs—winking in the sun; sixty paddling warriors aboard, two to a seat, armed with tomahawks and clubs, with spears and shields, boarding the doomed craft and murdering all by sheer force of odds, leaving the looted and charred shell for warning.

Kiyuku, petty chieftain from Yap, kept his head and his grin. His tribesmen, too, were notable boat-builders and unexcelled navigators, fearless as Makilini, and fond of a good fight. He had scars of honorable combat and he held the dwarfish Melanesians in a contempt that was only tempered by respect for their numbers.

In places the barrier reef was high and set thick with foliage, through which the lagoon could be glimpsed, avenued with trees like a tropical river. Gavin McLean marked the islands and the anchorages, named in the blackbirding days when the recruiters' scarlet-painted boats hovered along the beaches, tempting the natives aboard, the landing party covered always by the rifles of the second boat. There were grudges unpaid yet on Bauro, scores only to be settled with the heads of white men to replace natives taken to the plantations and not returned because of death, from accident or sickness. A place to leave well alone, Bauro, for all its beauty of dark blue seas and emerald lagoon, its girdling foam and golden sands, the groves of lofty, stately coco palms announcing the presence of beach villages, lifting swaying stems that burst rocket fashion into whorls of feathery fronds; the massed vegetation of the bush mantling the volcanic peak where, rumor said, a lake filled the ancient crater.

Wango and Sewlyn Bays they passed—Mosquito and Maoraha anchorages on the outlying islets; on to Star Harbor as the day waned. Then the beaklike promontory of Point Mary, stabbing the sea at the eastern end with the shoals a jeweled medley of crimson and orange and yellow, purple and maroon, the palms on the point inky black, etched against the glowing glory of the sunset.

More islands, some of them built up of coral slabs with a thin topsoil rafted from the mainland, refuges of the beachmen after dark from the raids of the bush tribes. Their canoes were coming off, laden with the women who had been working all day in the yam patches, guarded by their men, armed, some of them, with ancient Snider rifles whose cartridges they packed in the bark bandoliers that were their only clothing. Crude chanting sounded over the rush and roar of the reef. As they hauled off the land, there came the sound of drum taps from the upland villages where the young bucks were beating down the sun, ready to strut for conquest.

The sky paled, faded to olive green, then gray, and swiftly changed to deepening purple through which the swift stars broke, matched by radiating flakes of phosphor from the swarming scopelids, darting along the surface.

A strong current sucked at the schooner, swelled by the ebb that surged out from the lagoons of the far-reaching group and sought the deeper channels. Bauro slowly submerged, its peak aswim astern. Ahead, a great silver moon, shining like polished nacre, rose from the sea and laid a path for the *Mbelema* to follow. The wind lightened but the current swung and bore them on, twenty miles from land.

Joni, the brother of Kiyuku, had the wheel now, steering deftly between spokes, proud of his job. A soft radiance came from the cabin skylight, lifted for coolness, and presently there emerged strange, weird sounds, droning noises that gradually changed pitch, hollow groans and piping plaints. The three natives, squatting in the bows, stopped their own crooning and their rolling eyeballs showed the whites as they glanced at each other. Tataneliuaitu was communing with his familiar devils. Presently he would come on deck and talk to them. They were awed. Their bushy hair stiffened, and shivers ran up and down their spines, but it was not an ugly fear. Were they not the chosen men of the white wizard? Those were his devils and he held power over them, confined in a bag. They were under his protection, and it was a great thing to sail with a man who was the master of demons.

McLean came up from the cabin, a swollen bundle tucked under one arm, a thing that looked like the carcass of some strange beast, two horns projecting over his shoulder, streamers fluttering from them.

He set his mouth to a tube. Perhaps it was a tentacle. Now he was talking to the devils. Soon they would answer. His hands supported a bell-mouthed snout, thumbs below, fingers atop. He began to pace the deck aft of Joni, who felt premonitory thrills.

Lo, there were the devils! Chanting a diabolical jargon that made the soul turn to water and stir in fearful motion.

"*Hodroho hodroho, hananin, hiechin,*
Hodroho, hodroho, hodroho, hachin,
Hiodroho, hodroho, hananin, hiechin,
Hodroho, hodroho—"

The sounds swelled, triumphant, wailing, pleading, lamenting. They spoke of battle, of pride, of sorrow; they begged, they implored, shifting at last into a pandemonium of notes none of which were strictly in tune with each other. Sharps and flats warred in a discordance that yet held a wild harmony, backed by the steady droning of souls in anguish.

The devils were praying for release, telling their secrets as Tataneliuaitu unmercifully squeezed them, walking back and forth with proud stride and mien as became a conqueror of demons. Now the sound became a bleating Babel of revelation gushing under torment.

Hiundratatateriri, hiendatatatireri, hiundratatateriri, Hiundratatateriri.

The jumbling sonance ceased, the deep droning died away, the men from Yap sighed with relief, always a little afraid that one of the devils might get loose.

To them it was sorcery. To Gavin McLean it was a spirited rendering of the famous *piobaireach* "Coghiegh nha Shĭe," the "War of Peace," as taught by the McCrimmen Pipers on the Isle of Skye to their apprentices with verbal equivalents instead of printed notation which could not accurately set down the music of the pipes.

The bag of devils was his *pibroch*, his *piob-mala*, his bagpipes that traveled always with him and to which, indeed, he confided many things that vexed him, receiving due consolation and a peace of mind conducive to the solution of vexing problems. If it did not always affect his hearers the same way that could not be helped. Such things are to the heather born.

He was feeling a bit cocky over the way he had rendered "Coghiegh nha Shĭe," gracing the gruff syllables sounded by the chaunter with warbler trills. There was once a piper who could sound eleven grace notes between the two beats of a bar. McLean had managed leaps of five and seven in this, and he was justly proud.

He leaned against the windward rail, setting his lips to the blowpipe again to renew the wind. He was in fine fettle, he fancied, for "Cock o' the North!" The pipes had a tremendous fascination for him. There was something in their wild skreeling that unshackled his spirit, which seemed to stretch wings that otherwise were folded. It was a psychological phenomenon, inevitably experienced, that took him out of himself, his surroundings of present time and place and placed him in a fourth dimension where he, Gavin McLean, foregathered with ghosts of his forbears who were at the same time his own ghost. With them he saw, as in a mist, glimpses of stirring things, vaguely sensed, barely remembered. A dragon-headed ship with a great squaresail, with shields outhung along the bulwarks coming on, sped with great sweeps and landing on a shingly beach. Red flames bursting from thatch and rick, crying children, a medley of desperate men fighting with hastily snatched weapons. A woman borne off, screaming and fighting in the arms of a man, helmeted and mailed, wearing a long mustache of red. Stabs healed by kisses. A band of men deep to their bare knees in the gorse and heather, clustered in a circle, kilted, making a last stand with pike and targe against the legion from Britain in their armor, hacking with short swords, led by a resplendent horseman. Raids and victories, forlorn hopes and lost causes, and always the sound of the pipes to which the Gael responded. According to Gavin's own conviction, there was as much magic in the pipes as ever the men from Yap believed. Magic that spelled him out of the commonplace. There were no devils in the bag but the soul of Scotia.

A CRY came from forward. McLean leaned out across the rail and looked far forward, straight ahead into the moonpath, seeing there a tossing crescent of black that now and then gave off a flash as its wetly shining prow lifted to the jobbling sea. It was a two-man canoe, by its size, that had probably gone adrift, of no use to him, not worth bothering with. There was no sign of paddle or of occupant.

At his suggestion Joni swung the schooner a little off her course so as to pass close to the little craft. He gazed into it as it tilted to their swash and saw a man lying on the bottom. He imagined him dead. Then he fancied he saw motion that was not caused by the lurch of the canoe. There was the spark of the moon on a bright object suspended round the man's neck, lying on his chest, a disc that showed golden though McLean knew that it was most likely a brass token or the part from some discarded clock, things eagerly sought as ornaments by the beach dwellers.

He gave the order, and the *Mbelema* shot into the wind, hung there shivering while the men inhauled the sheets against a jibe. The canoe drifted down under their stern. McLean took the lead line and swung it with a side-long twist that wrapped it about one arm of the outrigger and held till they could draw the little craft alongside and temporarily secure it with a stronger rope to a cleat.

McLean came to the rail and took a closer look at the occupant who lay prone on his back, one arm flung across his face as if to shut out the glare of the sun. The right shoulder had been badly wounded. It looked as if it had been seized by a shark, though McLean knew that a shark would never have let go until the flesh had been stripped from the bone.

A strong man and a young man. Still, if he was dead! McLean saw a sluggish lift of the chest on which the golden disc lay shining, threaded on a sinnet cord.

"He's alive, Joni," he said. "Get down there, two of you, and bring him aboard. Handle him easy. There's little life in him."

Two of the crew stepped into the rocking canoe and lifted the man up to other willing hands who laid him down in the shadow of the rail.

"Cast off the canoe," ordered McLean. The men leaped aboard after releasing the lines, and the canoe went bobbing away. One of the men had a bundle in his hand about the size of a large breadfruit, wrapped in *ti* leaves, as the native women wrap their packages of fish and meat at the markets.

"What have you got there?" asked McLean. "Take him below to the cabin."

The man with the bundle grinned foolishly. Curiosity would not have permitted him to leave the thing in the canoe. Now he felt like a fool for having retrieved it. He showed it for inspection and McLean took it into his own hands. There were dark stains on the withering leaves and that, with the weight, made him guess at the contents. He partially husked it. A blowfly buzzed out. There was the odor of decay, a glimpse of a dead, black face, of curled back lips and a nose through which there was thrust a strip of bone.

For a moment, instinctively—McLean meant to throw the ghastly thing overboard, but he held his hand. Here was a part of the canoeman's story and he was minded to hear it. It might have something to do with the shining disc.

If he was going to hear anything at all he would have to get busy. The man who had been taken down to his cabin was on the very threshold of death, one foot across it.

"That was all that was in the canoe?" he asked.

The man who had brought the head aboard nodded. McLean went below, carrying it with him.

The rescued man's shoulder was in bad shape. The snarl of surface cuts was suppurating, the plum-black flesh had a greenish tinge and there was the sickly odor of gangrene. As he examined the wound while the man was mercifully still unconscious. McLean fancied the bone was crushed, but he could not be sure because of the tremendous bloating. Kekko came in with cold yams and dried fish. McLean sent him for hot water and a basin, busying himself getting carbolic and bandages from his medicine chest. He knew the wonderful powers of recuperation in a native from flesh wounds and loss of blood, but he did not believe he could save this one. His pulse was weak and laboring, his system, weakened by starvation, was impregnated by the toxic stuff from the gangrened hurt.

He bathed and dressed the latter. Kekko's eyes, as he played assistant, glittered as they looked at the ornament, but McLean let it remain where it was, though his mind was busy with it. He thought he knew what it was despite the worn surfaces, and he wanted to know more about it. And about the head. He could see clearly enough that here was a salt water man, one who "belong-along-beach," whereas the head had once been owned by a man "belong-along-bush," the two natural enemies.

There was a story there. It was not often the beachman bested the bush warrior, fiercer, better armed and more practised in fighting. The salt water men, in more or less touch with the white traders, were usually weaker tribes forced to the sea and the islands by the more aggressive tribesmen who took from them tribute of men and women for culinary and matrimonial purposes.

The wound attended to, he mixed some whisky and water and got it into his patient's gullet. The teeth were clinched but they were filed to point and the liquor trickled through. Almost instantly the man coughed, swallowed and gulped at the remainder of the draught before he opened his eyes, rolled them around to fix them on McLean's face as the skipper spoke to him in his own dialect. He saw the food and tore at the dried fish, cramming the yam into his mouth. There was no danger of this savage dying of repletion, as a white man might have done under similar conditions, his digestion was as primitive as his appetite and his toilet. Save for a narrow perineal band attached to a belt of neatly woven sinnet and the gold ornament, he was naked as a worm. His mop of hair was a faded orange and his skin was cicatriced with tribal wealmarks.

After all he did not eat much. The gesture was largely automatic. The toxic condition spoiled the flavor of the food. He looked at it half wonderingly and shook his head. McLean gave him some neat spirits and the effect was galvanic and spontaneous. He sat up, squatting Buddha fashion on the transom. His eyes flashed and he began to talk:

"I am Kurili, of Tipye. Nine days ago—" he did not use the numeral but held up the necessary fingers—"I made ready to take back my wife from the yam patches on the mainland to Tipye, which is an island made by hand where my people spend the nights for fear of the bushmen. Now, it was growing dark and the sun was behind clouds. We were the last to go. The others were already in the canoes.

"A tribesman of Niku, the Chief, whose village is high on the mountain opposite Tipye, came swiftly from the bush and struck at me from behind with his club, set with sharks' teeth. My wife saw him and called so that I turned swiftly and the blow fell on my shoulder instead of the back of my head. It struck me to the ground and he seized my wife.

"I have no gun. I had but my spear, and this I had to use with my left hand. He caught the thrust in his shield and wrenched so that the shaft broke off, but I closed with him and we fought. I took his club from him, though I was wet and red with my own blood, and I smashed his skull as if it had been a rotten breadfruit. I took the end of my spear and I cut deep about his neck. I twisted out his head as if it had been the root of a *taro* plant. For my *aitu* made me very powerful, though afterward I was weak. Also I took this from him that is round my neck."

HE FINGERED the golden disc and slipped it over his head.

"Take it, white man. Perhaps it is a charm, though it did not save him. Perhaps it will serve you better.

"Then I took my wife to the canoe with the head which she placed in a basket of *ti* leaves and I showed it to my people. There are heads of my people in the *hamal* racks of Niku, but we have none of theirs. Therefore, I thought they would be glad. But they were afraid of the vengeance of the bushman and, because the *tindalo*, who is my enemy—for he desired my wife and sought to keep her from me—counseled them, they spoke of killing me and setting my head ashore on the beach so that the bushman might be satisfied and the patches might be tended in peace, since there are not many on Tipye and we have but two guns.

"Then my wife spoke, as she has right, for she is the daughter of a chief. There was a man who had died that day of bowel trouble, and he was not of us but had come from Guadalcanal at the time of the spotted fever. He had no family. Let them take his head, she advised, and set it on the beach upon a stake with an offering of fish, and none would know the difference save the man who had sought to take her, and he was now but a broken calabash. Now there was much talk, and the *tindalo* called a council in our *hamal*, where my wife might not go because of the *tabu* against women.

"Me also they refused entrance, and I saw that the *tindalo* meant to kill me. Then my wife crept beneath the *hamal* and listened and came to me swiftly, saying that the vote had gone against me for fear that the ghost of the man from Guadalcanal would work mischief if they wronged him. Quickly she brought a little food but before she had finished we heard them coming and took the head and the charm, ran to my canoe and thrust it forth. The out-tide swept me through the gate of the reef. I left my wife on the beach, for it was in my mind that they might overtake me, for I was faint from loss of blood and could not paddle far. Nor is my wife now strong. If they caught us they would surely kill us both but if she stayed, they would not harm her since she was heavy with child and a chief's daughter.

"My arm swelled with the paddling and the current seized me. At morning I was far from land. The food lasted only two days and always the currents mocked me for I was spent and could do little to even steer. Sometimes I was borne close to land and then away far to sea. I dared not return to Tipye. Then, as I strove weakly to make landing elsewhere, a great shark came and tore the paddle from me, trying also to upset the canoe that he might devour me. Also the ghost of the man I had slain came and sat in the canoe, tilting it. But I would not give him his head which he might not touch because of the *ti* leaves wrapped about it. His charm was about my neck. Also my *mana** was greater than his or I should not have been able to kill him.

"That is my tale, white man. Now my veins burn like fire. Give me more of that strong water and perhaps I may sleep so that your medicine may heal me.

"*Look*, behind you is the ghost. Do not let him have his head nor take it from the *ti* leaves, for if he gains it he will have power to bewitch me so that I shall surely die. And I would see my wife and my son that is yet unborn."

McLean felt the jumping pulse beneath the hot, fevered flesh and noted the eyes varnished with fever, bright with recurring delirium. He mixed a powerful bromide and sat by his patient until he dropped into twitching sleep.

"Pretty soon that man altogether finish, I think," said Kekko.

McLean shook his head.

"He's got a dangerous temperature," he answered. "The arm should come off, but it looks as if the scapula was crushed as well as the humerus. I'll take a look at him later."

Kekko, not understanding but impressed with the big words that McLean had spoken to himself rather than the steward, nodded his head wisely as his skipper left him with word to be called at eight bells and went to his own cabin, the gold disc in his hand.

CHAPTER II

THE AMERICAN

JIM BUDD sat across the desk from the Governor of Fiji, Sir Edward Montgomery, C. B. K. C. M. G., in the latter's private office in Government House, set on a high hill above Suva. It was a long, wide, important building, deeply verandad, with the Union Jack flying from a tall staff on the roof and armed native sentries at the gates of its stately avenue to signify the importance of the building and the incumbent; who, by virtue of his office as Governor, was also High Commissioner of the Western Pacific, holding jurisdiction over all British owned and protected groups in those seas save those mandated in 1918 to the Australian Commonwealth.

Both men were dressed in white linen but, where Budd wore a coat and a low, loose-collared shirt, the governor had a uniform tunic, closely hooked and a collar so meticulously stiff and white that it made Budd run a finger about his own throat in sympathy.

Budd was brown, almost, as coffee. His aquiline features and rather high cheek bones gave him a suggestion of Indian blood, as if the true American type had absorbed something of the look of the aborigines of the country they had conquered and exploited. His eyes were gray and his hair was brown, sun-bleached.

The governor was preeminently British. He was clean-shaven, like his visitor, and his skin was reddish-tan. His eyes were blue and now, with no more of expression than the monocle that was set in one of them as tightly as if it had been welded to the orbit. His manner was official—British official—courteous but not cordial.

A secretary came in, young, foppish, also with an eyeglass which was not mounted, but dangled from a black ribbon outside his tunic. He glanced at Budd as if the latter was a misplaced piece of furniture, and gave some papers to his chief, who murmured an excuse to Budd that was unintelligible. He studied the documents.

Budd looked out of the window. He had a hunch that his goose was cooked, that all his work was wasted and a golden opportunity dying on its feet before it had a chance to get going, though all had seemed set for a good start a few days ago while he was awaiting the official summons.

Below him he could see the native sentries pacing in their pinked *sulu* kilts, their official brass-buttoned shirts, the belts holding cartridge clips for the rifles they bore so proudly, the "crown" shining at the buckle, sidearms swinging in scabbards. The trade was blowing in the serrated vanes of the coco palms, tossing them in plumy waves of green. It ruffled the flat tops of the rain-trees and scattered the scarlet blossoms of the flamboyants that bordered the placid emerald lagoon. Beyond the white line of reef, the sea was almost the color of Concord grapes. Above the long main street, metropolitan with its banks, offices, hotels and plate-glass-windowed shops, the white houses of Suva came dotting up the slopes among the thick-set trees in contrast to the red roofs of the lower town. The window was open but screened, and through the meshes the chastened breeze brought a faint medley of tropic breath, of heavy-scented flowers, of cloves, of the tang of the sea, langourous and enticing.

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*Psychological force—the great attribute in South Sea Melanesian life.

His glance turned back to the desk as the governor shuffled his papers and laid them down, with one eyebrow cocked as if in annoyance at their contents, the other clamped above the monocle. Budd's own documents were in evidence, sorted into three piles, two of them still bound with red tape, the other spread loosely in front of the governor on top of a blue sheet of flimsy that Budd knew was a wireless from the High Power plant of the government capital. That flimsy was the core of his hunch. It had been brought in from outside files soon after he had entered. He felt that it was the death warrant of his ambition and he ached to get the thing over with, to rush the official placidity, to crack the imperturbable mask of the governor.

His plan was a worthy one, there was no question as to that. It had been maturing in his mind for several years while he played the planter, went to war and came back again, only to find his enterprises broken, his lease of Samoan copra lands running out and not to be renewed after the mandate that gave the bulk of the group to the Dominion of New Zealand. British conservatism, protection of British interests in the Pacific had handed him one wallop, and this time, for all the governor's blank blandness, he could almost see the blow being telegraphed that would put him down and almost out. Yet he had had assurances of endorsement from time to time that had encouraged him. But there had always been the disturbing hunch right from the beginning.

Budd had been a lumber cruiser in earlier days, Oregon pine and California redwoods. A coast combine of associations had throttled his energies there, sent his ambitions glimmering after he had gone far into the practical side of the industry in the vain hope of his own independence. Now, in the Fijis he had seen a vast possibility of hardwood supply to take the place of fast diminishing sources, new and beautiful woods that, once introduced, would soon be in enormous demand. He had planned to meet the first of that demand, to create it and, for a year, he had worked in strenuous exploitation, securing promises of capital that would still retain him control after infinite difficulty.

He had made the last move he could. It was up to the Lord High Commissioner. And he felt nervous. Before he left the room he would be either a potential success with wealth in the background or broke, flat broke save for the lean layer of the few notes in his wallet—four twenty-pound bank notes and one ten, less than three hundred and forty dollars in American money, considering the exchange.

The samples he had submitted with his tender were neatly arranged. *Yaka*, exquisitely marked and veined, more beautiful than rosewood or mahogany, taking a wonderful polish; *savairabunidamu*, the color of ox-blood, tremendously tough and, most valuable of attributes, capable of being steamed and curved to almost any shape; *bau vundi*, Pacific cedar, durable and exquisite; *bau ndina*, hued like the heart of a rose, firm and close of texture.

There were other trees, such as the *vesi*, *dilo* and *dakua*, but these first four were the gems. They could almost be polished like jewels. In America, makers of cabinet work, of frames, engravers, designers of beautiful interiors, would hail them with rapture if they could get them in assured quantity.

Vesi and *dilo* and *dakua* were already being cut for building. Fiji had its sawmills and *dakua* was getting scarce, even as the imperial *yasi*, the sandalwood, had succumbed to the fury of demand. Budd loved trees. He wanted to use and not abuse them. He planned no raid, but judicious cutting of his groves with replanting that should maintain the source of beauty. And he had found an island that was virgin with the four choice varieties, an island that possessed the other requisites, deep water at the shore and slopes that facilitated lumbering. Necessities, these last, to success; prime points in his search for capital and prospective customers.

"Er-arhh! Very well, Gore."

HE PRONOUNCED it Gore, but Budd knew the name of the languid young exquisite who turned at the door, fixed his eyeglass and stared at Budd as if he had just noticed his existence and did not entirely approve of it, was spelled Gower. One of those trick names of the British aristocracy, like Lawson for Leveson. One of those little things that made one wonder just how to tackle the representatives of a nation that balled up things like that. Getting under the hide of the High Commissioner, Budd thought, was like trying to bag a crocodile with birdshot. You might irritate, or it might be considered tickling.

"Now Mr. —er—er—" the governor picked up one of the papers and monocled at it with the other eyebrow cocked—"er—Budd—" pronouncing it with an inflection that somehow conveyed his impression that Budd was immature and rudimentary as the undeveloped shoot of a plant that was slightly undesirable—at least in Fiji.

It was amazing how at once stolid in appearance and yet subtle in conveying his attitude the official could be.

"I have taken up your request for a lease of certain timber lands—er—to be later specified—" again he referred to a paper— "with the—ah—purpose of introducing certain valuable hardwoods—" he monocled at the polished samples before him— "to the—er, in short, the trade. The exploitation of the same to be subject to a royalty—er—yet to be determined, based upon the actual cut as—er—scaled by an employe of the British Government."

Budd nodded. That last concession he had given grudgingly when it had seemed the only obstacle left between him and the grant.

"I presented it to the—er—executive council with various reports and your own —er—documents and it received favorable consideration."

He let his monocle drop with such sudden detachment that it was almost as startling as if an eyebrow had fallen into his lap, and bent his blue eyes on Budd with an expression as unfathomable as if they had been mere insets of glass.

"Er—unfortunately—"

Here it came. Even in the swift knowledge that the deal was over and lost, Budd, with an irresistible twitch of the humor that had proved a saving grace to him in many pinches, suddenly recognized the governor's pose. It was exactly, ludicrously like that of the Mikado in the operetta when he tells the miserable offenders about to be sentenced to boiling oil and molten lead that, "unfortunately," the law cannot pardon them. The governor was, quite impersonally, sorry for him in a detached way that made Budd want to rise and say, "Cut the comedy, Governor, and spill the bad news." It would be funny to watch the High Commissioner's pained and puzzled look at the slang and the lack of Yankee poise. But when the jury has brought in an unfavorable verdict, the preamble of the judge and his ponderous platitudes before passing sentence are not edifying to the man in the dock. Budd was not to be spared.

"Er—unfortunately, for you, Fiji is a British Colony and matters of international interest are referred to the home office."

This time Budd's eyebrows went up. He had not considered his affair of such importance to the powers that be, however it counted with him.

"It is the present policy," went on the governor, "to conserve the natural resources of the Western Pacific for purely British exploitation, to reserve the possible profits in such enterprises as yours for the benefit of subjects of the crown."

"Even if an outsider has pointed out those profits and arranged for the introduction of the product to the biggest market in the world, the United States?"

Budd spoke a little bitterly and the monocle turned toward him like the lens of a microscope examining the reactions of an annoying insect.

"There should be a considerable market in the British Empire," drawled the commissioner," aside from the one you have mentioned."

"I suppose I'm turned down," said Budd crisply. "That is your privilege. Up till this morning nothing of this policy had been mentioned. You talk about your market. I haven't got the latest figures, but in 1919 you exported about nine millions in dollars. Four and a half millions of that went to New Zealand and three to the United States, a third of the whole amount. It looks to me as if Uncle Sam was a pretty good customer of yours. As for the lumber end of it, you've got sawmills chewing up your building grades of lumber and you haven't got any regulation to check devastation. You haven't got a replanting statute, and by and by you'll lose your watershed after the lumber's gone. You'll have sold all the golden eggs and killed the hen.

"And you haven't done anything yet with the hardwoods I propose to handle. My proposition gives you as much revenue, if not more, than you would get if you handled it as a government enterprise. As much as if any British subject was running it. I have already created interest in the United States markets, I have put my time and money into this thing, demonstrated the value of the woods. That should count for something, it seems to me. But, of course, if you want to make it a monopoly—"

"Ah, all very interesting, my dear Mr. er—Burr, I mean Budd. May I point out that, according to your own demonstration, here are valuable woods that grow most readily in Fiji. The timber is a valuable asset of my administration. Since 1919 your country has advocated protection. The tariff you have placed upon Colonial meats and wool, for example, are calculated to uphold the profits of your own stockmen and packing houses to the detriment of our export trade in those and other articles.

"The investigation you made, and the trouble you have taken in bringing your project to the point where only the lease or sale of the land remained to be consummated was undertaken with truly American —er—impetuosity and entirely on your own account. In my own mind such an industry as you outline, introducing new and beautiful woods, reforesting, conserving, would be in many ways a great benefit and an object lesson to us. No doubt there is waste of our lumber. We are looking into that. Meantime, the value of the woods in which you are interested, make them too vital a part of Fijian resources to be treated without full consideration.

"So—" he fished up the blue flimsy— "I have here a radiogram from the home office that instructs me to hold all native products for development by British subjects only. It leaves me no choice in the matter, and it closes it. While we are anxious to build up our revenues, which are but slightly in excess of our expenditures, it is the policy of the crown to do so only through the efforts of the subjects of the Empire. But I doubt if we are more of a close corporation in that respect than your own country.

"And, may I suggest that there is much valuable hardwood in the Philippines. I understand there are over forty thousand square miles of virgin forest, much of which is valuable hardwood."

Budd's lips tightened. He had underestimated the commissioner. The man, though he looked as if he might wield a broadsword, used a rapier with skill. His suave manner, his lack of heat, which Budd regretted having shown, made the *riposte* the more efficient. Ninety per cent. of the Philippines lumber was owned by the government which, in the opinion of Budd and many others, were coddling the natives beyond reason and making the exploitation of island resources infinitely difficult. Timber development was all under the license system. The small operator was granted a license for only one year. Obstacles were set in the way of even the largest operators, whose license might reach twenty years, but could never extend to ownership under any conditions. There were inspectors, usually native, petty and large graft, red-tape power granted to native complaint that could tie up work indefinitely; lack of transportation—a score of petty chiefs and greater ones who must be "smoothed" before road by river or land would be opened. Under license, waste was automatic. Lack of ownership, uncertainty of lease renewal meant lack of interest in future values. The total output for export was only a quarter of a million dollars, many of the licenses issued only for local firewood consumption.

THE Philippines! And American tariff. There was a mote in Budd's own eye, beyond question, that offset the British beam, prompted the governor's irony.

He got up and bowed, the commissioner with him, both men formally polite.

"I am sorry to have taken up your time, sir," said Budd.

"It has been most interestingly occupied, sir. I regret it has not been more profitable. You will want to take your documents? And your samples? I can have the latter sent to your hotel?"

"I'll take the reports. You can put the

samples in the wastepaper basket or send 'em to the home office." Budd felt he lacked the diplomatic placidity of the other, but he was holding the muddy end of the stick and he could not but feel that he had shown the value of the project at his own expense.

"I—er—did not notice the name of the island you refer to, generally, in your request."

"I can supply it if charter is granted. It did not seem to be necessary at the time. It is not necessary now, of course."

"No. Of no importance. There are two hundred and fifty odd islands in the archipelago. I merely noticed the omission. It is of no consequence. Here are your papers."

The High Commissioner gathered them together hastily as the young secretary once more entered the room, advanced to the desk and spoke to his chief in a whisper.

"Eh, what? He is? God bless my soul. You must excuse me, Mr. —er, Judd. A previous appointment." He made a swift sheaf of the documents and handed them to Budd who stuffed them into a side pocket and started for the door.

"Look here, what about these? What?"

The assistant was pointing to the samples of polished woods.

"Use 'em for paper weights," Budd answered. "Or firewood." He went swiftly through the outer office into the hall where he filled and lit his pipe before he went on down the broad stairs and down the stately avenue to where the sentries paced like bronze automatons.

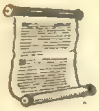
He had been let down none too gently. While he could, in a measure, appreciate the point of view, he could not entirely rid himself of the feeling that, while the High Commissioner was fair enough, according to his lights, there was something in the wind. His hunch was still with him, though it now presented another aspect. If he stayed in Suva long enough, he had a strong fancy that he would see the hardwoods on Ndonga being exploited for the benefit of a British subject who would become heir to Budd's pioneering. He might not hit the American market, and Budd had been cautious about supplying too much information in his request but he had been forced to give some details of the uses of the woods to prove the solidity of his proposal and a basis for profits upon which the government could base the assurance of a worthwhile receipt.

It was all very worthy and paternal from the British standpoint. Ndonga was an island of the Yasawa group, well off the western coast of Viti Levu. It was owned by a native but, under the colonial administration, the government superintended all sales or leases, took over the capital permanently and allowed the native Fijian owner, be he chief or commoner, only the interest on his money. Otherwise he would surely spend it all in riotous living, probably in one enormous, wasteful feast that would take months to prepare. So the government nosed into the character and financial respectability of the would-be purchaser as well as the nature of the business he proposed to carry on. The native was willing enough but Budd had been forced to secure a charter for lumbering as well as a provisional permit to purchase certain lands for such purposes.

There were many islands in the Yasawa Group, but none equaled Ndonga. There the trees grew in profitable size and quantity for immediate cutting; there was room for reforestation, and the lee, western and seaward side of the island offered facilities for shipment without prohibitive costs and a lot of rehandling. Budd had inspected other likely islands and cruised the likeliest before he settled on Ndonga.

There was an Englishman named Parker, who had a lease with three years to run on a strip of beach where he purported to carry on the business of copra planting. He was a remittance man who had leased the plantation in some first flush of reform resolution. There was a decent shack there with a copra shed and other buildings and, above all, a good wharf stilting out to the deep water. These were still in good shape, but Parker was inclined to sublease on shares or to let the season go, according to the state of his pocketbook. He preferred Suva to Ndonga, drinking and gambling and carrying on more or less sordid intrigues with women. When he was broke and remittances were not soon due, he went to Ndonga, not always alone, and lived a comparatively primitive life. Under great stress he might get out a little copra, but he was a drifter, well enough born but lacking energy or ambition; a hail-fellow-well-met with new acquaintances, but inclined to be a bit nasty in his cups, Budd fancied.

Parker had been on Ndonga at the time Budd cruised it. His landing was protected from all winds at all seasons. Budd asked for an option on his lease that included a good price for all improvements. Parker jumped at the offer and cash in hand for the grant of option, returned to Suva and the fleshpots to spend it. He was far from a fool, and since the natives on the island knew that Budd had been examining the trees, Budd made no mystery out of it, though he had rather fancied Parker imagined he was only after the ordinary timber.



RUDD had personally seen three members of the executive council and secured their favorable opinion on his project. The fourth man Parker claimed to know intimately. He assured Budd of this man's support.

"Trevor's a sort of half and half relation of mine, old chap," Parker had said. "Don't worry about him. I'll vouch for him. Naturally I'm keen to get the thing through. You've made me a jolly good offer and I'm beastly short right now. That little —— of a Mini has cut my wool a bit too short. Too fond of jewelry."

So Budd had not approached the man on that business, though he had been introduced to him. And now, leaving the administration grounds, he passed him. The other turned fishy eyes upon him and gave him the curtest of nods. Budd wondered why.

It seemed sure that the affair had gone wrong in council. For all the governor had said of favorable consideration, some one had suggested a putting the matter up to the home government. There had been other deals put through with Americans without such reference, though it was true none of these had started to develop new products.

He was fairly positive that the governor's little remark about the name of the island being missing meant something, sure that the governor knew the name already. Fine though the suggestion was from the representative of British officialdom, Budd was certain that he had detected a hint of interest in the question that was more than casual.

He nodded briefly to the other, marveling at the dead codfish expression that the councillor had achieved. Patently the other considered Budd as an outsider whose case had been dealt with, dismissed. But was that all?

He could come to no conclusion. The jig was up. He had spent his thought, his time and his money for nothing. He could only inform his prospective backers that he had failed to put through the deal, instead of jubilantly cabling them, as he had hoped, for funds to go ahead.

It was practically the end of the rainy season. A week or two more would see the holiday-making planters, the traders and their subagents leaving for the archipelagoes, there to work for another nine months' pay that they would spend in the three months' vacation. Some chose Papeete or Apia, many Suva and many Levulka, the ancient capital of Fiji, as places where they could meet and yarn, play pool, eat decent food, see moving pictures, ride in an automobile and, if they were lucky, talk and dance with a white woman, though their holiday time was not that of the tourists.

Budd was a bit fed up on Suva and he thought he would go to Levuka. It was not so smug there as at government headquarters and besides, Gavin McLean had told him he expected to be there about the end of March. Budd would have gone a long way to see McLean. He did not entirely fathom the Scot and he was not crazy over bagpipe music, but there were qualities about Gavin that appealed to him immensely.

Perhaps they could fix up something together. He might go on with McLean in a pearling deal if Mac had made out. Pearl shelling was a lottery and hardwood had seemed a sure thing. But perhaps Fortune, having flouted him yet once again, might relent.

He went on to his hotel, decided to pack and look up some small trading steamer bound for Levuka. At least there would be a trading launch. He knew several of the master-owners. It was midafternoon, warm, and he shed his clothes and took a shower before slipping on pajamas and stretching himself on a long bamboo chair in the awning-darkened room to smoke and review his work that had wound up in failure, wondering where he had made a mistake and wondering whether it might all be charged to the general pig-headedness of governments, blocking him in the Philippines as well as here with their paternal interest in the native and their ever abortive ideas of self-government.

It didn't avail much, he told himself. The British had stopped cannibalism in the

Fijis but the natives had not adopted British customs of living, preferring their own. Just as the highly veneered Filipino retained a sneaking liking for roast dog, not always confined to the Igorrotes. The Philippines had schools as they did in Fiji, but in neither place might the mass of the natives be styled actually civilized. Brown women and white might be much the same under their skins, but Budd did not think that brown men and white ones would ever react the same way.

Hang it all, he had seen the proposition of a lifetime in the hardwood game—a congenial, useful and profitable industry that should lead in a few years to prosperity!

THEN it began to rain, a sudden tropical downpour that hammered on the roofs and bowed the trees before its fury. It did not last long and it did not cool the air. It left it muggy, and Budd, in the reaction after the downfall of his efforts, drowsed off. When he woke he set himself to getting his things together. He was sick of Suva. He took the papers he had brought back from Government House, half of a mind to destroy them, looking them over casually before he decided not to do so. They represented a lot of detail. Suddenly his eye caught a letter with a name at the head. It startled him as he immediately took in its import.

It was typed on the stiff bond paper of the governor's stationery, engraved with the official heading and had evidently been gathered up and carelessly included in the papers the governor had given him in the hurry of dismissal. Probably a letter left on the desk for the executive signature. He did not hesitate to read it through, indignation boiling over within him as he did so.

G. A. Parker
Hotel, Bougainvillea.
Suva.
DEAR SIR:

Your proposal addressed to the Executive Council in the matter of a full lease of Ndonga Island from Matiri, the present native owner, has been given due consideration. The Council notes that you already hold a lease upon a portion of this property and that you desire to extend this beyond its present term, in connection with the lease upon the entire property.

Your intention of marketing any products under your lease solely in British territory is noted in this connection.

You are requested to appear before the Council at ten o'clock on Tuesday morning, the twenty-third inst, at which time Matiri has also been instructed to appear, it order that you may furnish sufficient credentials of responsibility to safeguard the payments of rental and royalties as they shall fall due and to submit other evidences of your intent and ability to fully develop the resources of Ndonga Island.

Very truly yours,

Lumber was not mentioned. It was hard to accuse the governor of chicanery. But Parker had deliberately double-crossed him—Parker and his relation, the codfish-eyed Councilman Trevor. Parker had stolen his brains. Trevor had furnished Parker with the details with which Budd had supplied the Council. Trevor who had suggested that the matter be put up to the Home Government. Trevor had had Parker include in his petition the marketing of products solely in British territory; an argument deliberately calculated to be effective.

It was quite within the bounds of possibility that the governor had no suspicion that Budd's offer, which he had refused, and Parker's offer, which the Council was evidently prepared to accept, were one and the same thing.

Was it then worth while to so inform the governor?

Budd dismissed that idea promptly. It would not alter the case so far as he—an American—was concerned. It would be no easy matter to traduce Trevor, an old resident of the colony, in high standing.

There was one way that appealed to Budd to offer him any satisfaction. Parker had turned out to be what the British, with illuminating brevity, described as a "rotter." That was why he had been shipped out to Fiji, years before, to keep disgrace from his family. Probably the continuance of his remittance depended entirely upon his continued exile.

Trevor was gray-haired, a man nearing sixty.

Parker was about Budd's own age, as tall, about thirty pounds heavier. That last, thought Budd, grimly, should about even up things physically between them. And now he was going to thrash the rotter who doubtless had been already informed by Trevor that his offer was acceptable and was chuckling at the way he had bilked the smart Yankee.

He knew that Parker was in Suva and fancied he knew just about where to find him. Not necessarily at the Hotel Bougainvillea. Probably at one of the suburban places, a shade or two above groggeries, where native and half-native girls waited on the customers, danced with them and generally diverted them.

He put the papers away and started to dress. Stripped, he showed in fine condition, if anything a trifle too lean, from climate and concern over his proposition. Long-limbed and long-muscled. The latter did not bunch and showed but slightly on the surface but they were well distributed. It would have made small difference to Budd in his indignation what the weights were even if he were dwarf to Parker's giant. Parker was going to get the licking of his career. He had, indeed, more than a notion that Parker knew how to handle himself. Parker had bragged a bit about his sporting prowess—he was the sort who did—and he was plainly proud of his physique.

"The native girls like a big man," he had said to Budd in a moment of convivial confidence. "Don't you find it that way? Men tell me so who've trailed from the Tuamotus to the Tongas. Sex, strength and stomach, that's all they care about."

Budd had dodged any discussion, shifting the conversation. He was not especially scrupulous about what the other man might do. He had known so many who solaced their loneliness by philandering with native girls that he did not enter into judgment upon their affairs; but there had been something in Parker's self satisfaction as a swain of dark-skinned *amoureuses* that sickened him. So he cut off the salacious bragging that Parker was plainly eager to regale him with concerning his exploits.

Now he would see whether this Fijian Don Juan could take a punch, or if he packed one.

But he drew blank for a while. Still in the hunt, he ate a good meal at the Hawksbill Café before he continued his search. At nine o'clock, still unsuccessful, looking rather than inquiring, for it flashed across him that if Parker knew he was being looked for by Budd, he might not await the issue—he was not sure that the remittance man would stand the gaff; he came across the owner-captain of a trading launch that made up its schedule between the two main islands of Viti and Vanue Levu, with Suva and Levuka as principal ports of call. The man was planning to take advantage of the tides at midnight to start for the latter post.

"Don't be late," the skipper warned Budd. "I'm starting sharp at twelve o'clock. Glad to have you along."

THAT settled, though he was determined not to leave Suva without seeing Parker, Budd took up his search again. It was eleven o'clock or a little after when he found the remittance man seated in the back "snuggery" of a groggery where white men did not mention going among acquaintances with whom they desired to remain on terms of respect. Parker was apparently not drinking heavily. He sat with a half-blood wench on his knee, giggling and crowning him with a fading wreath of *tieri* blooms and fern fronds.

He saw Budd enter. The latter noticed the swift roll of his eyes and the effort with which he controlled himself. A girl came up to Budd and took his arm, starting blandishments that languished when she realised, with a pout, that she might as well have enticed a stone image. Parker called a greeting across the room. There was small sense in starting anything in there, Budd quickly made up his mind. The girls would yell, the proprietor, a mulatto with none too good a reputation might interfere to break the thing up.

"I want a talk with you, Parker, outside," he said, his eyes bleak.

Parker waved him off.

"Some other time, old thing. In the morning. Not now, not here. This is the hour and place for pleasure, not business. This is the temple of Bacchus, Terpsichore and Eros. Intrude not with sordid things."

Budd fancied he was putting on, fencing until he could be sure what Budd was after. In the ordinary course Budd would not have known anything about the governor's letter to Parker. The latter could hardly conceive how it had come into Budd's hands. He knew that Budd's offer had been turned down and might imagine Budd sore about it. But that was all except that Budd's manner was warning him, perhaps, of something beneath the surface. Budd realised this and he forced his face to register a less severe phase.

"I've got to see you, Parker. And it'll have to be outside. I'm leaving Suva inside of an hour and I can't put it off."

There was distinct relief on Parker's face.

He shoved the girl from his knee and followed Budd from the room.

"Glad to jolly get rid of that girl," he said. "Planted herself on me. Now, what is it, old chap? Let's get the business over with and then we'll have a drink to your trip. Something come up in a hurry?"

"I don't know about the hurry, but something has come up," Budd returned. "I've got a letter you may be interested to look at, you can read it by moonlight, I imagine."

The moon was, indeed, bright enough for any one to follow newspaper print. The groggery, like most of its kind, was convenient to the shore and Budd led the way to a clear section of the beach where he handed Parker the governor's communication. He read it through swiftly and stiffened rather than wilted, as Budd had imagined he might have done.

"What about it?" he asked. "Governor make you a present of this or did you lift it from his desk?"

"That end of it don't matter, Parker. You've always tried to impress me with the fact of your family and how you were born a gentleman. That don't interest me. Never did. Maybe you've lied about coming from decent folks. Probably they shipped you out here because they knew you were a rotten throw-back. You've double-crossed me. I've lost time and work and money that you've tried to grab. You won't be able to make a go of the proposition. But you and your gentlemanly relative, Trevor, have played me for a sucker. I can't prove anything, only tackle the proposition man to man and that lets Trevor out. He's too old to thrash. But I called you out here to let you know I was on to your sneaking tricks and then to take it out of your hide."

"Is that so? Why, you Yankee sharper, you had to come over here to pull off your little coup. Thought we British were suckers, didn't you? And now you're sore. Start your thrashing, Budd. Want to go about it in decent shape or fight mucker?"

It came to Budd in a flash that he was not going to have a one-sided job on his hands, and the realisation gave him relish. Parker clearly considered himself the heavier and better man, he was deliberately trying to goad Budd into a rage by reversing accusations. The remittance man stood cool and confident. Whatever he might have been drinking during the previous hours seemed to have small effect upon him now. Parker was relying on weight and skill. Budd fancied he might be equal as to the latter and he thought that his lack of poundage would be more than overbalanced by better wind.

"No timekeeper, no seconds," said Parker. "How about old prize ring rules. Round's over when a man is down? Fight finishes when one can't get up?"

"Suits me."

"Might be interrupted here, at that. Over in that *pandanus* there's an open space and we'll be screened in. This is your proposition, Budd. If you get the worst of it don't squeal."

Budd shrugged his shoulders. The other's coolness had its effect, but he was not going to let it get his goat. Parker had deliberately chicaned him and his anger crystallized to a cold resolve to leave the Englishman in such shape that would make him remember the encounter. He reckoned that he had about thirty minutes to accomplish this in. He did not believe that Parker's wind would last a third of that time, or a sixth.

Parker's topography proved accurate. There was a clear ring hedged about by the bizarre shapes of the *pandanus*, with their roots looking as if the sand had been blown away from them, their fronds stiffly present. They shucked their coats and Parker rolled up his sleeves showing corded forearms that were thick with flesh and muscle. Budd's leaner members looked slight beside them.

"Foul fighting barred, protect yourself at all times, what?"

Budd nodded as Parker set his attitude, upright, left foot and arm extended. Budd dropped into a crouch. The affair had taken on a certain dignity. It was a duel rather than a thrashing. Parker had exhibited an unexpected poise. He was going to take it standing up. Not necessarily out of any idea of having merited punishment as with a complacency born of the belief that he was going to get the best of it, a complacency that put an edge on Budd's anger.

He was not a practised boxer though he knew more or less about the game principally from observation, but he had had experience of sporadic, dynamic fights that had inevitably occurred in his wanderings and had not lasted long. He meant to carry the fight to Parker and to keep carrying it. Yet he felt that already there was something of a fiasco about the performance. He should have taken a healthy swing at the remittance man instead of letting him talk him into a sort of duel.

He kept his left well out, but flexible, and dropped his chin back of his shoulder while his right covered his diaphragm. He was nimble and strong on his legs. There he was sure he had the best of it. He feinted with his left, drawing it back as Parker's right rose in defense, and hurled himself forward inside the other's guard, sending in a left jolt hard to the stomach, dodging the straight right, trying for an uppercut with his own dexter fist and receiving instead a smashing exchange that caught him on the cheek and jarred him, sending him back on his heels and warning him of the weight and force back of Parker's blows. He bored in again but it was not easy to get through the other's defense and, when he did land, it was invariably in a trade. He played for the body and once he put a hard one to the kidneys that hurt Parker and brought him back with a furious rush that made Budd give ground though it left Budd half blown and gave his chance to attack. The soft sand was tiring. It slowed them both up and they stood at close quarters, hammering with swinging rights and lefts.

He traded a stiff right to Parker's heart that made him gasp with a hard jab that caught him on nose and lips. He felt the blood start, tasted it and saw Parker grin at him. But he knew he had hurt his man and, though he was tiring, realized that Parker was in sorrier case. He leaped in and Parker clinched and wrestled, trying to trip him, back-heeling and using all his weight in a fierce attack that brought them both hurtling to the sand, with Parker uppermost, striving to pin Budd down, to get his knees on the latter's biceps while he sat astride the other's chest and hammered furiously at his face while Budd twisted his head from side to side, squirming and managing to fend off most of the vicious punches with his forearms.

Parker's eyes glared, and Budd smelled the sweat that dripped off him while his stomach worked like a flabby overdriven bellows.

"Got you, you beggar," Parker grunted. "Thrash me, will you? How do you like that?"

But his blows lacked force, his wind was broken. The yielding sand made it hard for him to keep his knees on Budd's arms that constantly needed straightening out.

THOUGH Budd was the underdog, he felt that he was the stronger. He made no effort to throw off Parker, gathering strength for one final upheaval, getting oxygen into his lungs to recharge him with energy. Parker's handicap of poundage was Parker's best asset, but he thought he could overcome that, and he knew that Parker's heart was pounding while he gulped and wheezed for air after the long encounter.

Suddenly Parker stopped flailing at Budd and grabbed him by the throat in a burst of rage that was close to murderous.

"I'll teach you your lesson you —— interloping Yankee," he panted. "Thought I was a mug, didn't you, selling you that option—?"

But Budd had got his strength back with his wind. Before Parker's big hands could clamp down he tore the hold loose and twisted his body in a sudden, sidelong lunge that sent the bigger man off balance. Budd, watching for an opening, struck with all his might and the swiftness of a cat at the flesh-cushioned, double-chinned jaw.

He felt the jar of his knuckles against bone and Parker rolled over on his side and lay still as Bud got to his feet and stood over him, wondering whether he had knocked him out. Parker's legs were drawn up and he lay with his head on one arm, snoring as if he had fallen asleep.

The tide lapped on the beach, the land wind rustled softly in the stiff fronds and the reef boomed as it flung its bright spray skyward in the moonlight. The shadows of the *pandanus* were sharply, fantastically flung on the little arena as Budd glanced round. For a moment he fancied he saw some one skulking between the trees but he could not be sure, and then Parker moved and laboriously got to one elbow, looking up with an expression of pained surprize that was ludicrous enough for Budd to smile grimly as he stepped back.

"Take your time," he said. "I'm not through with you yet." His shirt was smeared and spotted with blood—his own.

His cut lips smarted and he was savagely conscious of a swollen nose. He was glad that Parker was coming to. The latter's face was unmarked and Budd was savagely determined upon making it a caricature. He was sure now that he had taken the measure of his man. He had leached the conceit out of him by that knockdown smash just when Parker thought he was having it all his own way. Parker could box, but Budd did not believe he could fight. Budd himself was just beginning to warm to it. Parker's pluck had been based upon the cleverness of his attack and defense, backed by his weight; a combination that had probably won him many brawls and built up for him a belief in his own supremacy that had smashed and left him uncertain.

"Come on, you blighter," he said as he got slowly to his feet and put up his hands.

But there was scant conviction in the words and his flabby paunch belied them; he puffed as he stood his ground while Budd circled, feinting about him. Parker knew his own legs were weak and the sight of Budd, lithe and nimble as a bull-fighter, was not reassuring.

Budd had learned a few things in that first encounter. While he respected Parker's boxing, he had found a flaw. If Parker's left had been as good as his right things might well have been different. But there seemed some lack of coordination there, his left was slow, nor did he punch as straight with it as with his right. Inevitably he radioed its action in advance.

Budd, well hunched, head tucked in, feinted, faked a slip and drew a slogging right that he caught on the top of his head and sent sliding over his shoulder as he recovered—ramming his left, stiff as a poker, pistoned from his hip, hard into Parker's short ribs just above the belt.

He caught Parker's sluggish left on his right elbow as he bored in, caught it at the wrist as his own right traveled on to reach the stomach while, with his head on Parker's chest, he side-hooked his left to the kidneys and felt the big man's body quiver with the short-circuiting pain of the blow.

Parker's legs, far apart, sagged a little as Budd leaped out and in again. With left and right to the body, he saw, with a flash of triumph, Parker's guard go down to stop that punishment. Left and right, left and right again to the head. He did not reach the point, Parker's fat and sweaty jowls shielded him but, as Parker gave way, one eye was closing and gore spurted from his nose.

Clumsily he broke ground, the trampled sand hampering him, Budd after him like a puma after a bear. Parker's lungs were deflated. He was out of condition. The pith had gone out of his arms and his legs were leaden. Budd was all over him. He covered up his face from the cruel punishment of the bare fists and left his plexus wide open.

Budd went for it, his blow sped with all the force of a flying tackle, traveling the few inches of punch with a force that sent it in through the fatty layers and depreciated muscles to paralyse the great ganglia that lay underneath, to pound the blood out of them, to shatter their connections.

Parker flung up both hands in an agony, gasping like a great fish, his face contorted with pain as he sank to his knees and Budd pitilessly flung in left and right to the unprotected jaw, finishing with an uppercut that sent the knuckles of his right hand back with the impact. This time he connected. Parker slumped full length on his face, arms out, quivering—still.

He was out. He would come to with Budd gone, lying alone on the sand with his face battered and his kidneys and belly sore. He would probably be violently sick from the solar plexus blow as soon as he got consciousness. And "Tuesday, the twenty-third inst." was tomorrow. Parker would not be a pleasing spectacle when he presented himself before the governor's council. Such an appointment would not be easily postponed.

Budd went down to the water to swab off his face with his handerchief before he started for the launch to Levuka. It was well within the possibilities that Parker, through Trevor, would have him arrested for assault. He had no fancy for being escorted by native police in kilts to Suva's jail. With a councilman to exert influence and pressure a lone American would stand a scant chance when, after extended delays, he was at last brought up for judgment.

LATE though it was—he had about twenty-five minutes left before midnight—he did not want to go through the main street. There were plenty of people on it from the clubs and hotels until that hour. He decided to go by the beach rather than exhibit his stained clothing and bruised face. Parker's was far worse, and that took some of the sting out but it did not reduce his puffed lips and nose nor stop his right hand swelling where the knuckles had gone back in that last punch.

He walked back up the sand before he started wharfward to take another look at Parker, who lay prone, motionless and limp, almost as if he were dead. For just a moment Budd wondered if he might be; if his heart, rotted by over stimulations, had given out. He bent over him and satisfied himself that Parker was breathing. He turned him over on his back and the moon looked down and showed Budd what an excellent job he had done of altering Parker's features. The damaged eye had a beautiful mouse above it, and unless the nose had an operation it would never be the same as it was before. Bruises were manifesting themselves where the congested blood was purpling in the broken surface veins. Parker's lower lip was swollen, there was blood dark on his upper lip and on his jaw where it oozed from his nostrils. His mouth was open and, with that and his broken septum, he gargled like a choked drain.

"I'd like to see you when you look at a glass," Budd chuckled.

There was a sudden stir among the *pandanus* to one side. It might have been a puff of stronger breeze. He made for the spot and passed through, finding nothing. There were a lot of footprints, old and new. Plenty of people went through the little open space by daylight. There were canoes drawn up above it with nets drying on the outriggers.

He felt fairly sure that some one had been looking on, probably a native, and he was not ill-pleased, hoping the man would spread the story of the fight so that Parker might not present his own version of his disaster. He left Parker gurgling at the moon and hurried.

Three minutes after he went aboard, the launch put out through Suva Harbor on the top of the flood, heading north for Levuka. In the hurry and the dim lighting Budd, with only a word or so of greeting as he swung his bags aboard, had not been noticed. Now the skipper called him into the cabin from where he had sat outside on the rail, and switched the lights on.

"Good ——, Budd!" he said. "What have you bin doin'? Committin' murder?"

"Something like that. It was a two-sided affair."

"I'll say it was. You've got bloody finger-prints all over your throat and your clothes are a mess. Cut things pretty fine, didn't you?"

There was something like suspicion in the voice and narrowed eyes, and Budd, realizing he had mopped his face and forgotten the marks of Parker's fingers about his throat, bloody from Budd's own freely flowing claret, noting the splash of blood on one knee, spattered on his torn shirt; granted grounds for mistrust.

"I didn't kill him," he said. "But I gave him a good licking which was coming to him. It wasn't as easy as I thought it would be but I pulled it off."

"Any one I know?"

"You might. Parker."

"Parker of Ndonga? That bounder! Chasin' young native girls, and a lush who thinks he's better than the men he'll bum drinks from when his own remittance gives out. Serves him right, whatever you did to him. Better clean up a bit though, Budd, you look like a thug."

"I will. I'm going to turn in, anyway. Got any iodine. This hand needs some."

"Swelling like a mushroom, ain't it? I'd like to have seen the scrap. Where'd you pull it off?"

"On the beach a little way from Black John's."

"Who was with you?"

"Just the two of us. Parker stood up to it. Had me going once, but his wind gave out."

"Too bad there was no one to see the fun. You'd better get some one to look at that paw of your's when we get to Levuka. That old Frenchman, Ledoux, is a fine surgeon when he's sober. He can reduce that swelling."

Budd yawned.

"I'll take a three-finger drink with you, skipper," he said, "before I roll in."

CHAPTER III

THE CELT

LEVUKA, deposed island capital of the Fijis, takes her reduction proudly. On the isle of Ovelau, in the natural center of the archipelago, with a fine natural harbor in the coral and two deep and safe entrances, Levuka sits regnant, one of the most beautiful places on God's footstool, the earth. White bungalows are scattered up and down the mountain side, streams come pouring from the heights in shady ravines or leaping verdant cliffs, the main street runs along the beach with towering coco palms above the low buildings, native huts cluster here and there, the whole scene set in magnificent foliage.

It is still the threshold of adventure, the lintel across which thousands of white adventurers have stepped, from the first convicts arriving from New South Wales in 1804,—twenty-seven outlaws, introducing the fear of firearms and the dominance of the white; the Wesleyan missionaries thirty years later—to the white men who came under the rule of Thakambau, the cannibal king who ordered the tongues of prisoners cut out and ate them raw before the victims, cracking jokes the while. A long line of vicious murderers and courageous priests, of blackbirders, traders and planters!

Thakambau, renouncing the eating of human flesh but retaining polygamy, changing his name to Ebenezer, selling his land to the British Government for a miserable mess of pottage and at the last, bringing back from a visit to the governor of New South Wales the measles that killed forty thousand of his people and made them certain that the gods were displeased at the surrender of their land to foreigners.

Skippers of the South Sea slave trade, pearl-seekers, sandalwood men, copra traders, whalers and those who catered to them. Purveyors of shanghaied crews, dealers in well muscled Polynesian men and well formed girls. Owners of grog shanties, gamblers, brothel-keepers, tricksters, together with ship chandlers, caulkers, builders, storekeepers and hotel proprietors. All the hodge-podge of a South Sea port. Fugitives from justice seeking a hiding place, runaway apprentices, seamen deserters, escaped men from Noumea. Bad, indifferent and a few good—those who combined commerce with daring and those who sought only the indulgence of the vilest passions.

Jennings, the Yankee who lorded it on the beach at Levuka and threatened to shoot those who opposed him; "Savage," the Swede, Paddy Connor who was the power behind the throne of the King-Chief of Rewa and had the living bodies of those he hated or wished destroyed flung into a red-hot pit-oven until the white residents drove him from the island. "Bully" Hayes, the Reverend Waterhouse, sowing seed on stony ground but reaping harvest, Owens of Adelaide, stopping the last cannibal feast by threatening to close up all trade.

Thus Levuka, becoming truly civilized, a place for tourists now, no longer the back of beyond but still the final port of call for the savage Solomons, the volcano-crowned New Hebrides where ape men prowl the jungle trails and all the power of the British Empire has not stopped the hunting of heads and the cooking of long pig.

To Levuka in the off season come many traders in pearl-shell and copra, in *bêche-de-mer*, sharks' fins and turtle shell. With them the trading agents who stay on lonely beaches, running the copra plantations, hoarding a nine-month's check for three months' vacation where they can talk with their fellows, play pool, hear a band, dance on the hotel porches or on the floors of less reputable resorts, see a movie and perhaps be invited to a house where a white woman presides who will give them a real dinner and talk afterward of home. The lumbermen, the vanilla planters, growers of allspice, turmeric, vanilla, coca, sisal, ginger, cocoa, bananas and pineapples; make Levuka their island Paris, playing holiday while the rains have their way. For all of these Levuka has its entertainments, caterers who seek to appease the inhibitions of men who work hard and wish to enjoy themselves without restraint. Ovelau is an island paradise from which the wily serpent has not been dismissed, it has its dusky Eves and its Liliths. The tourists do not often come in these weeks of downpour and muggy weather that are not conducive to sight seeing. The native constabulary preserve law and order but, except in cases that call for stringent measures, the white lords of the beach do much as they please.

Here, rather than to Suva, come the men from the outlying groups, skippers and mates and supercargos, spinning yarns that would be deemed wild tales elsewhere—a schooner wrecked and burned on a reef, triumphant drums beating in the bush and the woodwork slashed with strokes of tomahawks, the planks stained with blood. Wild men escorting wild women to their daily plunge, naked save for the bark cartridge belts that hold the few precious shells for ancient Sniders and Tower rifles, jungle brutes with matted beards, tricked out with bone and shell. Crates of bleaching skulls set up along the beach in crates like rabbit hutches, proclaiming the strength of the tribe, trespass signs against invasion.

Conch shells booing after dark while tribesmen raid for wives and meat. Roseate glare of burning mountains. Whispers of virgin lagoons, of pearls, of ambergris, of gold in river bottoms where no white man has sought and returned. Weird mummies of white men with their skulls built up in clay masks, racks of skulls in tribal clubhouses with here and there the gleam of a gold-filled tooth from satirically grinning jaws that hold the secret of horrible massacre; wizard's aprons of old men's beards and women's tresses; yarns of albinos, of piebald men, of lepers, of great sea monsters; an Odyssey of the Black Islands—somber, strange, enticing to the brave.

Men of many races but not of all. English, Scotch, Irish, Australians, New Zealanders and Canadians in prominence; then Americans, Frenchmen, Norwegians, Swedes, Portuguese, Chinese, a stray Greek or two and the ubiquitous Jew, half-breeds of all sorts and natives everywhere, resisting for the most part the white man's ways, though sharing his vices.

A little back from the waterfront stood The Haven, run by Louis Renault, known from Singapore to Papeete as "Levuka" Louis, shrewd and none too scrupulous, with his brains and dollars in many far-flung enterprises. For a sum, it was said that Louis would cover the tracks of a defaulting banker or other absconding fugitive; that he was not too fussy as to the ownership of pearls or cargoes that he might buy, that he made advantageous loans on the plantations of planters short of ready cash and was eager to tempt fortune at roulette, faro or the poker games that were always going on. The Haven was never raided though often sounds of riotous merriment and sometimes of rougher turmoil came from behind the thick hibiscus hedges that masked the low coral-walled building and its arbored garden.

It was said that no man found his pockets or his stomach empty in The Haven but what he could get some credit, a tideover loan and often a job. How much of this was charity and how much clever business it is hard to determine. The Haven was popular. Louis was ever bland, sleek, immaculate in white linen with a black *cummerbund* over his portly stomach, twisting the ends of his waxed mustachios, twirling his imperial, spinning his webs as he mingled with his guests.

THE place was full. Pretty half-blood girls waited. There were deft mixers of drinks behind the long bar. A native orchestra thrummed and occasionally sang. There was no dance floor. Two big rooms and a wide porch in the main building. A kitchen. Half a dozen cabins in the garden where rooms could be rented for transients. Arbors there also where, on fine nights, the meals were served and drinks consumed.

At a poker table where five players skinned their cards while others looked on in growing numbers as the word passed of high stakes being ventured, of daring players equally matched in the finesse of the game that has long since become international, sat Dennis Connolly of County Wexford, sunburned, merry and tall and lean with tropic wanderings. His hair was black and his eyes were blue, twinkling with Celtic humor. His fellow players sat sphinx-like, their faces trained, but no mask was more effective than the face of Dennis with its swift smile and never varying registration of good nature. Between hands his talk was rife with jests. He won or lost with apparently equal zest. He played the game for its excitation, played it open and liberally, with keen appreciation of its risks, good judgment of values and the characteristics of the other players. If his talk was light, it betrayed nothing. No man there was sure when Connolly bluffed.

He drank more sparingly and smoked more steadily than the others. His nature needed little stimulus. His was the joy of living. For Dennis, money only represented chips, and life a game at which he liked to play for high stakes. Life was not to look on. Before and since the war he had chased will-o'-the-wisps from the Paumotus to Papua and back again, fortune sometimes fluttering in his palm like a captured bird or mocking him as it flew on ahead while Dennis laughed and renewed the chase.

His last coup had been the finding of a great cave where sea-swallows had built their gelatinous nests, and he had sold them for enough to a Chinese trader to stake him to several weeks of Levuka.

Now he shoved forward a stack of yellow chips, divided it into smaller piles and announced his bet.

"It sure looks as if you were out to make a killing this trip, Edmonds, but Southard was kind to me too. I'll see that hundred dollars and raise it two hundred more."

The next man on his left, Benton, a prosperous storekeeper dealing in traders' supplies, carefully studied his cards, skinning them over so that only a hint of the corner indices showed, shielding those with his hand. A cautious chap, Benton, ahead in the game so far; taking no chances on any overlooker giving away his hand, purposely or otherwise. Next to Benton was Southard, dealing the hand; manager and part owner of the Levuka Soap and Copra Company, a man with a long face, like a horse, with a habit of keeping his eyelids almost closed and his eyes cast down when he was playing; a close man in business dealings, without sympathies for any one beyond himself, and a good poker player. Edmonds, who had made the opening before the draw, was a heavy-jowled, broad-shouldered individual with a blue powder mark on one cheek and a scar at the angle of his jaw. He affected a ponderous sort of cordiality, of jesting, that, beside Connolly's flashes of wit, was as a tallow candle to an electric torch. He described himself as a trader, the title covering, according to the best authorities, a multitude of sins.

Edmonds was a crony of Levuka Louis and was supposed to be Louis' agent in many affairs that might not stand the light of day. Pearl poaching was one of the activities attributed to Edmonds and he was also given discredit for a modern form of blackbirding—not the securing of labor recruits for plantations, but the buying or stealing of native girls and shipping them to markets more appreciative of their charms than their own vicinity. Beach bully and drunkard he certainly was, apt to show all of the brute in his cups, but capable of managing an enormous amount of alcohol. He was not as good a poker player as he fancied himself, and he had already lost money in this session, quite a little of it to Connolly.

"You've bin milkin' me all night, Connolly," he said. "Now, by ——, I'm goin' to git it back with interest! Give you fair warnin'."

"You would," answered Connolly. "I appreciate that, Edmonds. Got a little pat hand, have you, waiting there? Well, I've seen them beaten. Anyway my money's up."

He had known Southard and Benton for a long time. Edmonds he had met off and on, casually, and had never liked him. Edmonds laughed with his mouth and scowled with his eyes. Connolly figured him a bad loser and an ungenerous winner. Right now he evidently had a prime hand. So had Connolly, three queens and a pair of aces, a good hand to hold in a five-handed game before the draw, with less than half the deck dealt.

Benton tossed in his cards.

"Too rich for my sportin' blood," he said, "though I could have opened the pot all right."

"Scared off?" asked Edmonds with his laugh that always seemed to hide or assumed to hide something that now suggested a sneer.

"You can put it that way if you want to," said Benton quietly. "It's just the cards I'm scared of, though."

Southard came in with his three hundred dollars and Edmonds added his two hundred and promptly raised five hundred more.

The man between him and Connolly, Wilson, supercargo for Edmonds, whistled softly and threw his hand into the discard beside Benton's.

"There goes a hundred bucks," he said. "I hate to win from the Old Man, natcherully—" he winked as he spoke—"but I hate still more to lose to him. Looks to me like he was loaded for big bear."

It was known that Wilson, as supercargo of Edmonds' topsail schooner, was partner rather than employe, as was Richards, his mate, playing faro. The *Starlight* was run on shares in the old piratical fashion. The native crew did not count, but Wilson, Edmonds and Richards split the nefarious profits, less what there might be coming to Levuka Louis who, rumor said, tipped them off to the whereabouts of pearl troves and later acted as fence in the disposal of them; discovered customers for good looking native girls, fixed the prices and often located, through his far reaching bureau of information, where comely maidens might be acquired by barter or outright kidnaping.

There were few secrets in the Western Pacific unknown to Louis, few that he did not manage to turn to his own profit.

Connolly had nearly four thousand dollars with him. He had been winning off and on, and his original stake from the edible birds' nests had multiplied over expenses. This looked as if it was going to be a lively tilt, and he rose to its lure as a trout to a fly, looking carefully, however, for trace of a barb beneath the glitter.

Edmonds must have a good hand—fours or a straight flush. Edmonds was out for Connolly's money this time. He sensed that the Irishman did not like him, that Connolly's merry eyes looked down his stares with a raillery that nettled Edmonds. Connolly regarded him as a crook and, being one, he resented it. He was not the type to make a successful card sharper or he might have tried his hand at it. Now he plainly thought he had Connolly beaten despite the fact that the latter had been the first to tilt his opening bet.

It was clear to Dennis that his full house was not much good. With Edmonds holding what he evidently fancied was an unbeatable hand, Connolly could not bluff him. And there was Southard to reckon with. A close man, but a gambler with a pet superstition or two. A man who was always dangerous as long as he was holding cards. He might be forced out or the prospective size of the pot might coax him on.

"See your five hundred and make it five hundred more," Dennis said.

Southard took up his hand, screened it, regarded it as if he was working out an intricate problem in mathematics. His mouth closed a little more firmly and he pushed in the thousand dollars. He was just "shacking" along and letting the other two do the betting.

EDMONDS set it up again. It seemed plain that most of the wagering was going to be done before the draw, plain that there must be three good hands out, and excitement began to show among the spectators, shared by every one except Benton and Wilson, who sat back impassively enough, and the three players who concealed whatever they felt, studying each other to decide their draw.

It was going to be a showdown. Edmonds was bent on getting all of Connolly's money. He was automatically conscious of Southard staying in but he was not considering the manager of the Soap Company. It was a bout between him and the laughing Irishman whose eyes always seemed to tell him that Connolly rated him for what he was, a blackguard and a bully, and did not fear his resentment. A bout in which he had slipped the button off his foil. His hand was practically unbeatable. Fours that he was going to hold pat and let them guess whether he had flush or straight or full.

He was going to lift the bets each trip, and Connolly would take the dare for the sheer love of the game. As long as the four thousand lasted he would raise back. Four thousand dollars did not amount to much. If he won the pot it would be twelve thousand, and with that he could stake himself in another game that would take him out of doors, with the green sea for his gaming cloth, playing for unseen but alluring stakes that lay beyond the rim of the world. There was a fine schooner he could buy for ten that was worth twenty-five per cent. more. The two would go for trade, for provisions, for wages and incidentals. He was tired of the few hundreds he had won from time to time. The rainy season had left him, as always, restless, and he wanted to be off across the fenceless meadows seeking the unknown. If luck was with him he would win out on the draw. If not sheer necessity would start him going, doing something better than staying around Levuka.

"Let's make it a thousand better," he said. "I surely need the money. I've got a special use for it."

"Figurin' on payin' up all yore debts to once?" asked Edmonds spitefully while Southard methodically counted his chips and put them in with a marker to make up what they lacked.

"I always figure on doing just that thing, Edmonds," said Dennis.

The other's antagonism was reacting on his mercurial temperament. It enhanced the thrill of the game. Edmonds was going to take it hard if he lost. He had his own following besides his mate and supercargo, cronies who were standing round the table now, men of uncertain reputation who plainly regarded Edmonds as a leader.

"But I'm needing this for a pet scheme of mine. I'm after buying a schooner and going looking for Lost Island."

"Where the devil's that?" asked Wilson.

"Sure if I knew where to find it 'twould be small fun looking for it."

"Who lost it?"

"Who knows. I reckon I did. I'm looking for one that no one's ever found." He had a meaning that they could not understand. There would always be a Lost Island to Dennis Connolly, lingering below the horizon and he would be ever longing to lift its peak or sight its palms, to set foot on a virgin beach.

"That's a good one," laughed Wilson. "How can you lose something that never has been found first?"

"'Tis an Irish way of talking. Call it a bull, if you like," Connolly answered carelessly. "Are you lifting me again, Edmonds? I see Southard's still with us."

"Another thousand," said Edmonds. His clipped tone and the gleam in his eyes betrayed anticipatory triumph that he either could not or did not care to conceal. Connolly met and raised and again Southard stayed, dispassionate and cool, after due consideration.

"I've got a hunch you two are trying to freeze me out," he said. "And the same hunch tells me I'm liable to raise —— with you both."

"I never saw a hunch you could hand through a cashier's window," sneered Edmonds.

His eagerness to win, or his cocksureness, was beginning to break through his composure.

"These cards of mine are worth just a thousand more before you can see 'em. It costs money to see my hand."

Connolly met the thousand and made a final lift of five hundred from his roll that left him with something less than fifty dollars for unpaid bills and current expense, announcing that was the end of his finances. Still Southard trailed deliberately. Edmonds laughed.

"Slowed you up, have I? Well, there's your little five and here's a thousand more. If you've come to the end of yore roll mebbe you can borrow some on your hand, if it's so —— good."

Connolly shook his head.

"No. I'll ride my own judgment with my own money. I get a showdown on what I've in the pot. You two can go ahead as far as you like."

Edmonds turned his eyes on Southard. For the first time he seemed to realize that the manager was in the combat.

"How about it?" he asked. "You heard what the Irishman said. Go as far as you like."

Perfectly imperturbable, Southard once more took up his hand and consulted the cards as if to make certain that he had made no mistake. He swung his almost sad horse-face to Edmonds with the look of a condoling undertaker about to book an expensive order.

"You're no piker, Edmonds," he said in evident admiration.

"I'll say I'm not. Not when I'm playing with real sports."

"Don't know whether I qualify. Man can't bet more than he's got, but I'll go as far as Connolly till I'm down to cases. Happen to be a bit flush just now. I'll see that thousand of yours and raise you five."

A good many of the lookers-on gasped. Five thousand dollar bets did not come every night. Edmonds' face grew sullen.

"I haven't got that amount in cash with me," he said.

"Neither have I, but my check's good. There are twenty men here who'll tell you that. Louis will endorse it, I think. Yours too."

Edmonds sat scowling. He had been trapped when all he had wanted was to be sure he had all Connolly's money in the pot and to make a grandstand play with another raise he knew the latter could not meet. Dennis did not seem to feel any sting at being short of cash, and now Southard had jockeyed him into a wager that would crimp him if he lost. He could not get out of it very well. Connolly had frankly stated his limit and a table stake showdown was coming to him up to the value of his bets. If Edmonds refused he acknowledged himself the piker he had proudly proclaimed he was not. He turned to Wilson.

"How much you got with you, Jim?"

Somewhat grudgingly Wilson counted out eighteen hundred dollars. Edmonds made his check out for the necessary balance after his own cash residue had gone in, and put it in the pot with Southard's.

"I call you," he said.

"I can stand another raise, if you want to make it," said Southard.

Edmonds grunted something unintelligible and Connolly's eyes danced. He began to wonder whether he was going to win after all. He knew Southard's play pretty well and he had felt fairly certain that so far Southard did not have either of them beaten. He had heard more than once that Southard took long chances in business and that, back of his caution in business details, there was the love of chance. Also that he was not a man who forgave an injury and there was a story of an ancient grudge between him and Edmonds who had left him out of the profits of a deal whose illicit character forbade public redress. Southard was not the kind to squeal but it might well be that he was taking a long shot to get even with Edmonds. In that case the draw would tell the tale.

"I'm playing these," said Edmonds, tapping his hand which he had laid face downward.

"Fours for you," thought Connolly, as he selected his pair of aces and tossed them to the discard. "I'm taking two," he said. "It's on the knees of the gods."

"Dealer takes one," said Southard quietly, throwing away a card after a final careful inspection that convinced Connolly he was drawing to a flush, probably a straight flush open at both ends.

CONNOLLY laughed aloud. He had not yet looked at his new cards. It was not necessary; he was out of the betting if there was any more; but the spectators ached to see if he had bettered. The situation was fairly well understood by most of them though they were not sure of Southard's draw. Connolly was, and he laughed from sheer enjoyment of the uncertainty of the moment. If he had caught a fourth queen, having thrown away aces, Edmonds had to have one combination to beat him—kings. It looked like a good bet he had Edmonds beaten, if he had caught the fourth queen, and he would not lift his hand, dallying with the thrill of the hazard.

Southard picked up and very gently moved his cards fanwise, holding them to his chest.

"How about it, Edmonds," he asked gently. "Want to make another bet?"

Edmonds glared at Connolly's cards. The Irishman's indifference galled him. There were a lot of men there whom he had bossed at various times. Levuka Louis himself had come up and was standing back of his chair. He felt that he had already lost prestige. He had fours from the start. The cards had been running fairly high but the odds were surely against two sets of fours in three hands, and it looked as if Southard might hold another.

There were twenty-four cards undrawn. He spoke with sudden rage as he met Connolly's laughing eyes.

"You seem to find a lot of fun somewhere," he blurted. "Why in —— don't you pick up your cards and find out what you've got?"

"I'm waiting for you and Southard to get through. I'm sort of on the sidelines with a show for my money. You two are the capitalists. As for fun, why not? Is it only the money you play for, Edmonds?"

Edmonds gave him an ugly look.

"May as well show our hands," he said, "I've got no more spare cash."

He displayed four jacks. It was a hand that could not be laid down, normally good enough to win but he had bet more on it than he wanted to. The onlookers inched in. Levuka Louis alone turned away indifferently. He had missed little of the play before he came behind Edmonds' chair. Edmonds was useful to him, but more useful broke than flush.

Connolly flipped over his cards, one by one. A queen, another, an eight of hearts, a third queen. The queen of spades. He knew then he had caught the fourth, but his face did not change its expression of sheer enjoyment. The crowd drew breaths and expelled them as they saw the hand exposed and knew that Edmonds, staring unbelievingly, was beaten.

"Did you catch it, Southard?" Connolly asked, his voice utterly friendly. Edmonds was cursing silently. If he had not made a flash of standing pat, if he had thrown away his odd card and drawn another, he might have killed Connolly's draw. Now he owed Wilson eighteen hundred dollars and Wilson would not be complaisant about the loan. He was not that sort. Moreover he had drained his balance in the bank to less than fifty dollars. He was in much the same financial shape as Connolly stood if Southard won, but to him money was a fetish. Without it he could not swagger, without it his rank and independent standing with Louis was at once reduced. Louis inevitably took advantage of circumstance. Edmonds had just come in from a trip and now he would have to forego Levuka and the indulgence of the appetites he had been forced to curb. No money meant no women, no convivial nights.

"I believe I did." Southard's voice broke the silence gently. "It was a double-ender, you see. All pink, starting with the four straight through to the eight of diamonds."

"Good man," said Connolly, whole heartedly. "Took sand to hang on."

Southard gathered in the stakes methodically.

"Its your deal, Edmonds," he said.

"You know —— well I'm broke, curse you."

"Then have a drink. Louis, have them make it champagne for the house. Any of you others want to play any more?"

"Faith, I can't," said Connolly, "I caught my queen but she was a fickle jade after all."

The others shook their heads. The standing onlookers moved to the bar. Southard joined them as host and Connolly and Benton went with him. Wilson and Edmonds remained at the table, alone. Edmonds' cronies did not care to join him. He did not like condolences.

"You'd better give me a note for that eighteen hundred before you forget it," said Wilson.

"As if you'd let me. Look at that —— Irishman. You'd think he'd won instead of being cleaned out."

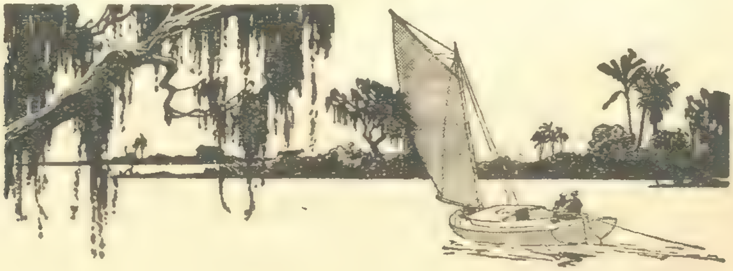
Dennis Connolly was proposing the health of Southard, acclaiming his nerve in staying and raising.

"He's a good loser," said Wilson with a slight emphasis on the first word. He was not afraid of Edmonds. "Make the note out on the back of a check. You might die overnight."

Edmonds glared at him with bloodshot eyes that protruded slightly, the veins standing out on his forehead and his hands. He was in a murderous mood, keen to vent his spleen on some one. But there was not excuse enough to jump Wilson with his sarcastic sentences. They were in too deep together. Moreover, he knew that Wilson was not in the least afraid of him and that he carried a gun in a shoulder holster. Edmonds did not. He had a preferred weapon, a knife, that he could use more ways than one, could fling with the cleverness of a juggler. He was a poor loser and he knew it. His rage choked him. Southard had got even with him but Connolly had mocked him; would not have congratulated him if he had won.

A pretty slip of a half-blood girl came with a tray on which stood a bottle of champagne and two glasses that Southard had sent over to the table. Edmonds suddenly thrust back his chair, anxious to get out of the place and the sight of those he felt were jeering at him. The bottle had been uncorked and the two glasses filled at the bar. The chair caught the girl roughly and the tray upset. Edmonds was drenched with the contents of both glasses and the bottle struck the back of his head, spilling the frothing stuff on his neck and back. A laugh went up and he whirled and slapped the girl heavily across her pretty face, sending her reeling. With the face of a devil, beside himself at this last mishap, Edmonds leaped for her with closed fist.

TO BE CONCLUDED



TIME

by W·A·Macdonald

BURTON woke up and listened. He heard the night cry of a locomotive. Two men's voices came up from the street. The wheels of a horse-drawn vehicle rattled harshly. Street lights glared softly at the windows of the hotel room. But Burton knew that something was going on in the world, something more than these few sounds of the night. His mind was alert, active, startled. He sat up in bed and pulled on the light.

He was a youngish man with a dry, quick look about him. Even as he came quickly out of sleep he seemed never to have been asleep. His short hair was not mussed; there was no heaviness about his eyes. His skin was hard and clear, a slightly tanned skin drawn fine over a face that was not thin, but less than rounded. His eyes were gray and narrowed in an habitual concentration of questioning.

He questioned his thoughts. He was in a strange city and a strange hotel; there was nothing new in that. He had awakened suddenly with a feeling of prescience; it had happened before and had been unfounded. He was both sensitive to and doubtful of his instincts. He did not believe in hunches. He sat there still and thoughtful beneath the light that brought out the hard lines about his mouth. The senator he had interviewed that afternoon, there was no question that he had left unasked of him. Train time for home—that was not until ten o'clock in the morning. He looked at the watch on his wrist.

It was one o'clock. Burton reached for a cigaret on the table and, as he exhaled the first breath of smoke, picked up the telephone.

"This is Mr. Burton in Room 347," he said. "I want to talk with Stormboro, the Stormboro *Chronicle*, a newspaper. The number is Main 1. Will you hurry the call for me?"

He put down the telephone and watched the smoke wind between his fingers.

"Now," said he to himself, "what am I calling the office for at one o'clock in the morning? There is nobody in the office of a decently conducted afternoon newspaper *at one o'clock in the morning. Maybe I think I'm a cub reporter with a hunch.* Maybe I had a dream."

The telephone bell rang.

"Ready on your call to Stormboro," said the operator.

"Hello," called Burton. "This is Burton. I'm in Wexham. Yes, Wexham, fifty miles away. Is anything going on? What are you doing in the office at this time of—?"

"Dick! Dick!" interrupted the voice from the other end. "This is Keeler. I just dropped in here and got a call from Lieutenant Snow of the Coast Guard. He says there's —— to pay on the island of Woodland off the coast. Town's afire and people battling with bootleggers. I couldn't find out where he got his dope or how many people know about it. He was in a hurry. Snow said the telephone cable to the island is out of commission. If you're at Wexham why don't you try to make the island. You're fifty miles nearer to it than I am."

"Right you are," said Burton. "Tell the chief I took a chance on a trip to sea. There may be something in it."

He hung up and inhaled smoke. A tiny pulse was beating in his forehead, the throb of the old adventure of getting news against time. Woodland was fifty miles away to the south and about fifteen miles off the coast. He knew that bootleggers used the place which had a winter population of about a hundred. It might be quite a scrap, quite a scrap. He fished for his money and for a timetable, his eyes squinted against the thin drift of smoke.

Twenty-five dollars. That wasn't enough. Trains — no more trains tonight. He made very sure of that by checking with the railroad station by telephone. The nearest railroad point to the island was the small town of Arnold. He could hire a boat there to take him to the island. But how to get to Arnold? The next train was at quarter of nine in the morning. That would get him to Arnold at quarter past ten. Half an hour to find a boat would make it 10:45. Fifteen miles in the boat, if it was a good boat, would make it 12:30 or maybe one o'clock in the afternoon. An hour to get a line on things ashore would be two o'clock with not a line written, no means of getting it to the office if it was written. To write much of anything would take until three o'clock, the deadline for the day, the time after which no news could be got into the paper short of world disaster. And then would come the chance of the morning papers of next day to have first crack at the story.

"Bad business," said Burton aloud. The pulse beat harder in his forehead. News against time, that was the old adventure throbbing again. But wasn't the town of Arnold a station for the Coast Guard? Let's see, there was a cutter stationed there normally. But probably already sailed for Woodland. Well, some motor boat would have to do. To get to Arnold quickly, that was the need.

Burton shuffled through the telephone book and gave a number to the operator. The signal rang and rang in his ear. The second hand of the watch sped around its small circle frantic with speed. Over the telephone came a dead voice muffled in sleep.

"I want to talk to Senator Briggs," commanded Burton sharply to the servant.

"Who is it wants him? He's asleep," said the voice irritably.

"This is a matter that means the lives of people," continued Burton. "Please put the senator on the line."

There was a click and a delay. Then a new voice.

"Yes, what is it?" The senator had come on the line.

"This is Burton speaking. The reporter that talked with you yesterday. I'm sorry to trouble you, Senator, but there is a row in your State that you ought to know about. There is a battle on the island of Woodland between the people and the rum runners. You ought to know of it early. It will be useful to you."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Burton," responded the senator more cheerfully.

"I have to get there myself," said Burton. "What I want is a taxicab to take me to Arnold. I can charge that to my paper if you will vouch for me to the cab company. You saw my police card this afternoon. It is extremely important that I get there."

The voice at the other end was completely awake now. The senator was living up to his name as a man of decision.

"Get your cab and come to my house. I'll talk to the taxi company while you are on the way. I'm much obliged to you. I can see how I can use this information."

"I have to borrow some money, too, Senator," said Burton, listening carefully.

"I guess we can fix that too," said the voice.

It was quarter past two when Burton left the house of the politician. He had unlimited credit with the cab company; he had a hundred and ten dollars cash. Instead of an ordinary cab he had a heavy roadster and it was under the hand of a silent young man with a hard face, the broken line of whose nose jutted unevenly from under the visor of a battered cap.

"Now," commanded Burton to this profile, "it is up to you to travel."

"The car can do it," growled the man out of the corner of his mouth. "It's a good road all the way to Arnold. There won't be any traffic. Rain's the only bother."

It was beginning to rain. The street glistened already a little as they swung out of the residential district upon a straight, wide road. The headlights burned steadily into the dark; there was a quiet murmur of horsepower; a warm, comfortable smell of exhausted gasoline when Burton, habituated to looking before and aft, turned his head to look at the vanishing lights behind. He drew his coat closely about him and was glad of the experience that had taught him to have it both light and warm and proof against rain. The driver stepped on the gas and there grew a deeper murmur beneath them. The broken-nosed profile seemed harder than ever. The road flashed and glistened and unrolled.

THEY were traveling a dark avenue walled with trees—oaks and pines and once in a while the silver ghostliness of birches. As the road began to wind, the driver brought down the speed, and the indicator said thirty beneath its little bulb as they neared a wall of woods that meant a curve. It was a sharp turn and the road was thoroughly wet. Suddenly Burton had the chained and helpless feeling that goes with the beginning of a skid and, as he tensed and braced himself, the machine slid wildly. It shot over toward the side of the road. A bulk swept up ahead, another car, standing without lights. Then luck and a turn of the wheel and maybe a foot of good traction, and they were saved. They were still on the macadam—their car at a stop, its motor thrumming, its lights showing straight ahead on another long run of open road. But under Burton's elbow a voice spoke harshly.

"Stick 'em up and get down here."

The light of the speed indicator caught on the steel of the automatic's barrel.

"Make it snappy."

The face above the gun jutted out sharply under the visor of a cap. The hand that held the gun was taut in its drawing muscles. Burton struck up his hands and stepped one leg over the door of the car, feeling with his foot for the running board. The chauffeur had his hands up, too. Over Burton ran a wave of suspicion of that broken-nosed man. He quelled it while he thought out the probabilities of treachery.

"Now open up that extra seat in back," ordered the face behind the gun. "Don't worry, I can cover you both."

Burton fumbled with the seat and got it opened. The illumined dial of his wrist watch came beneath his eyes and the pulse began to beat in his forehead. Time, time, time, he was losing time. As if he were present he could see his office, the hands of the big clock at three in the afternoon, the men at the desks, the letdown as the deadline passed and no story from him.

"Now get back in the car," said the harsh voice under the cap. They got in and the man with the gun climbed cautiously into the rumble seat.

"Go ahead," he said grimly. "And when I tell you how to go, you go that way. If one of you makes a wrong move I'll drill you. Step on it."

The car began to move again. Except for the soft *bur-r-r-r* of the motor and the whine of the tires, there was silence. Little by little Burton relaxed. He was thinking steadily. He turned his head slightly and felt the sharp prod of cold steel behind his ear. It hurt.

"What's the idea?" he complained. "I haven't got a gun. What do you want to hold us up like this for?"

There was no answer. He took a chance and turned his head again.

"Why didn't you kick us out in the road and leave us there?" he called bitterly. There was no answer, but no steel touched him. Then, after some pause:

"Maybe I thought I couldn't get my car started," replied the harsh voice. "You're going where you can't get to any telephone until I'm where I want to go. Keep your head front."

The voice was confident; it was not so vicious; the voice of the captor, master of his men. The car slid on.

"Can I have a cigaret?" Burton called back, the pulse of time beating in his forehead, his eyes turning downward to the illumined dial.

"Sure," said the harsh voice after a flick of hesitation. "I want one myself."

The chauffeur slowed down. Over Burton's shoulder a package of cigarets dropped in his lap.

"One wrong move and you're through," said the voice. "Keep your hands out of your pockets."

A box of matches rattled over Burton's shoulder, a box of safety matches, but twice the usual size, the size found in kitchens, the reporter thought. Burton's hand closed over it quietly.

"I've killed one man tonight," said the bandit. "He reached for a gun on the kitchen shelf, and you watch your step if you don't want a hole in the back of your head and a bigger one in the front. Now take your smoke and give the other bird one. Put it in his mouth. Now light a match for him. Now light your own. That's right. Now be careful, be careful. Stick a cigaret back here. I got it. Now light me a match."

Burton struck the match and held it back quickly without trying to turn his head. It blew out. He tried again and he saw the glare fade.

"What's the matter with you!" exclaimed the bandit. "Put your hand around it, you —— fool. Turn around a little. I got you covered all right."

Burton half turned, both hands employed with the big box of matches. He held the box in one hand and a single match carefully in the other. He would get it this time. He saw the cigaret over his shoulder and held his two hands closely together, the head of the match in his right hand in contact with the side of the box which he held in his left. The box was still half open.

"All ready?" asked Burton.

"Go!" said the bandit.

Burton struck the match. Into the half-open box, as the cigaret moved forward to take the light, he thrust the flame and, in the instant of the blinding flash and hiss, struck wildly at the hand that held the gun. The automatic bellowed into the night to the shouted curse from the bandit. But Burton was over the back of the seat gripping with both hands the wrist that supported the gun, and upon his back plunged the sinewy body of the chauffeur.

"Ha!" grunted Burton.

But the chauffeur's hands were at the bandit's throat. Burton felt the wrist relax in his hands and the body grow limp beneath him. As the fingers slowly let go of the gun Burton took it with a wrench and struck once at the head from which the cap had been torn. The body gave way beneath the heavy butt. The pair slid off into the road breathing hard.

"I got a strap here," said the chauffeur. "You watch him. Here's the flashlight." In the circle of the light lay the sorry spectacle of their struggle. The chin and nose were black with the burn of the box of matches which Burton had shoved backward against the face. From the tangled hair a widening stream of crimson trickled across one eyelid of the sin-marked face. Only faint lines of good nature about the eyes showed the part of the man's nature that had granted the request for a cigaret. Burton lifted the limp body and bent it forward to put the arms behind the back.

"He ain't dead, is he?" asked the chauffeur appearing with the strap. They felt of his wrists and listened at his chest where the heart was beating steadily. Then they strapped his wrists together tightly behind him. A length of oily cloth bound his feet. "Now," said Burton, "we'll put him in front and I'll ride behind."

The hands of the watch had got to half past three when the car began to roll again. The pulse was beating, beating, beating in Burton's forehead. He recovered the package of cigarets by leaning over the seat, and lighted two, one of which he passed to the man at the wheel.

"I took a chance on you," he said. "That was a good, quick job you did without any warning." He watched the grim profile of the young man at the wheel move in a slight smile as the driver turned his head to answer.

"I had a hunch something was coming," he said. "I've seen action before."

They drew at their cigarets.

It had not been raining here. The road was dry. The strength of sixty horses increased beneath them as the car sped on. The speed indicator began its upward swing. Once or twice the prisoner twitched and Burton leaned over and saw that his eyes were open; the blood from the scalp wound had dried and he looked more evil than ever. He snarled and spat.

"Four o'clock," said the wrist watch and a street lamp blossomed palely as the dawn widened upon the road. They were getting into town. The houses were nearer together and, from one chimney, smoke plumed above the morning.

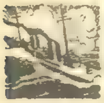
"Hope nobody sees this bird," called Burton to the driver.

"What are you going to do with him?" questioned the other over his shoulder.

"Pound him on the head with a gun butt if he doesn't stop trying to get his feet loose," returned Burton grimly.

The bandit stopped his surreptitious twitching.

"I want to run down to the dock first," said Burton. "There is a wharf there that the Coast Guard uses. If there is a cutter in I'm going aboard if she's going where I want to go. If no cutter we'll have to find somebody who has a motor boat."



THEY rolled through the brief business section where the only figures in the street were two weary old men plodding on their misty business. They cut down the hill past the railroad track along the waterfront and along a cobbled street toward the wharf they sought. Above the low buildings rose a mushroom of smoke.

"The cutter!" cried Burton. "Step on it." They bounded over the cobbles. "Drive down on the dock!"

The chauffeur twisted the wheel and the car slid between two old buildings. They were on the dock. The ship there was a destroyer of the type taken over from the Navy by the Coast Guard.

"My ——," breathed Burton, "she's sailing!"

Dark water was already widening between the ship and the wharf. Burton fished in his pocket and brought out a twenty-dollar bill.

"Here, take this," he barked at the chauffeur. "For yourself."

"What're you going to do?" exploded the other. "Those birds won't wait for you." But Burton was already on the ground. The car had rolled to the head of the wharf and the ship was a hundred feet away, but Burton was wasting no shouting. He was busy with the prisoner. He lifted the man out of the car and carried him to the edge of the wharf. Then, supporting him with one arm, he reached in his pocket for the automatic which he had dropped there and, holding the gun over his head, emptied the magazine. And, as figures on board moved swiftly along the deck at the staccato of the shots, Burton, holding his prisoner firmly, jumped off the dock.

He had hardly hit the water before the chauffeur crashed in beside him.

"What the ——!" exclaimed that individual, spitting salt water. "You crazy?"

"Help!" shouted Burton. "Help!!"

The commotion aboard ship took on swift orderliness to the accompaniment of sharp calls.

"Help!" shouted Burton, and what with his burden he needed it. As the chauffeur trod water beside him and reached for the prisoner, Burton saw the boat that he hoped for swing from the davits and give way with a run. He sighed a salty sigh then and grinned at the wet face of the chauffeur.

"You get back on the dock," said Burton softly as the boat bore down. "I've got to get on this ship, but you haven't. I'll send you some money for the clothes later in care of the company. There's a ladder back of you. I can hold this bird. Beat it."

They separated slowly, the chauffeur swimming toward the ladder, and Burton saw him emerge from the water just as he felt the hand of the boatswain pass under his arm. He was still holding his prisoner who looked half dead, which Burton was not concerned with now. He reached out a dripping hand to the shoulder of the brisk young officer who faced him as he stepped on the deck.

"Are you sailing for Woodland?" demanded Burton.

Before there was time for an answer the slender ship shuddered and Burton knew that she was under way. Swiftly he calculated the distance back to the dock and took two steps backward toward the side.

"Yes," snapped the officer. "Follow me, please. The captain wants to speak to you."

They climbed the companionway forward. On the bridge a gray-haired man was staring steadily ahead as the ship gained way. He glanced coolly at Burton and then back at the harbor.

"Captain," said Burton, "I'm an old friend of Commander Vivian of your service." He saw the cool eyes warm slightly. "My name is Burton, of the Stormboro *Chronicle*. It is a vital matter for me that I get to Woodland to this row at the first minute possible. I hope you are going there. I had an idea you were going there. If you're not, I've got to get off the ship before it's too far to swim ashore."

"Left a point," said the captain to his executive who repeated the order to the quartermaster. The firm mouth curved into the slightest of smiles. "I'm going there as fast as I can," he told Burton. "How is Commander Vivian? When did you see him? Mr. Jenkins, find Mr. Burton some dry clothes and hot coffee."

Plus these things and a cigaret some time later Burton explained his prisoner to that officer.

"But why didn't you leave him ashore?" asked Jenkins. Burton blew a long, thin stream of smoke.

"Thought I might need him. By the way, how is your wireless working?"

"It isn't," retorted Jenkins. "We haven't any operator; he's sick on the beach. We'd have been out of here before but for him and a wrong gadget in the engine room.

"No wireless!" muttered Burton vacantly.

No telegraph or telephone from the island, no wireless from the ship. Hur-r-r-o-o-o, he said in his throat. The pulse was beating wildly in his forehead. A quarter to five, said the wrist watch. And three o'clock in the afternoon was the dead-line. A quarter to five. That meant Woodland by six o'clock anyway. If the engine-room gadget didn't give out.

"How long do you suppose you'll stay at Woodland? Of course you don't know. Foolish question. Hm-m-m-m." Burton reached for a cigaret. "Lieutenant, do you know what the telegraph facilities are at Arnold, this place we just left?" Lieutenant Jenkins laughed.

"I should say I do. There just about aren't any. I found that out a month ago when I tried to send a wire from there. The office is open from two to four in the afternoon when the operator is willing, and he is next to never willing. He is known as the crossest-grained man in town. Oh, he does open from eight to nine in the morning, I believe, but he closes on the stroke of nine and heaven itself couldn't make him wait. He'd stop sending at nine if he was in the middle of a word."

"Well," said Burton. "Well, well." He lifted one knee over the other and watched the smoke unfold its thick running ribbon through his fingers. "Well, well, well."

He was like a man whose mind has become benumbed. But in his forehead beat the distended vein excited by the war of time against news. They were silent together for a minute in the smoke.

"Looks like a bad day," remarked Burton. And then, "I suppose I'd better tell the story to the captain. Can he stand it while he is on the bridge?"

"Yes," said the lieutenant, and they climbed back to the bridge.

They looked down on the swirling water, the blue-green water that swept backward past the lean sides; they heard its rush and susurrus.

"Have you got a pair of handcuffs you could lend me, Captain?" asked Burton. "I'm going to keep that bird with me for a while. But if you've no objection I'd like to leave him with you while I'm ashore at the island."

"How are you going to get back to Arnold?" inquired the captain. "I don't believe I can help you about that within your time limit."

"The answer to that," said Burton, "depends upon what we find."

They were getting in. The water was greener; the harbor lay in sight. On the island a few low buildings huddled along the skyline. The taller ramshackle of a summer hotel jutted up somewhat back from the shore. The captain swung the handle of the engine-room telegraph and the ship slowed. They were coming to the long wharf that fingered out from the beach. Then the men on the bridge saw the ruins that fire had made of half a dozen small buildings. It must have been extinguished for some time because hardly a wavering stem of smoke marked the destruction. And in almost the same instant that Burton saw this, his eye took in the long, low cruising power boat rolling in the swell beside the wharf.

"That's the boy I want," said he.

"Rum runner," said the captain.

"I don't care," said Burton.

There was considerable doing by now aboard the destroyer as the landing party got away. Up the dock with the guardsmen went Burton looking to right and to left for a possible owner of the motor-boat. There was no one in sight. There was no one on the beach or on the street of the town. Then a scared face peered from the window of a shack and the force stopped. Jenkins knocked at the door and a woman opened it reluctantly.

"Where is everybody?"

"At the hotel," she replied. "My man was shot."

"Where is he?"

"At the hotel."

She shook her head when he began to ask her more. They left her and swung up the street toward the hotel at a leisurely gait.

ON THE side porch stood a man with a rifle. The guardsmen kept on and the man took a step forward to meet them. At the sight of the uniform he held up his left hand and beckoned them on.

"Got a doctor?" he called. He was red-eyed and his face was black with smoke. "Our doctor's been shot," he said wearily. "He's in there."

He motioned to the door which stood open. The file of men passed in. In the roomy lobby a spectacle greeted them. In the middle of the room sat a man on a barrel. He wore something that might have been a uniform. His neck was without a collar and his coat had only one sleeve. A rifle lay across his knees and he gripped a ragged butt of a cigar between his teeth. On the floor about him lay twenty or thirty men. Some of them were lying in the unrestrained positions of men asleep; some were trussed hand and foot. Two or three moaned and groaned. The man on the barrel wore a badge on his breast. He looked up and shifted his position and the position of his rifle as they entered.

"There's the chief," said their guide.

"Got a doctor?" asked the chief. "There's some men shot here."

He took one reassured look as the surgeon went to work. "We've had a hard night here," he said. "You didn't see many out, did you? They're all asleep, I guess. It began yesterday afternoon. A bunch of 'em landed some stuff here. Well, that's all right, we're used to that. But they had too much to drink and they thought they could run the town. Couldn't see it myself. Don't mind liquor, but they've got to leave the women and children alone. Had to shoot a couple o' people. Didn't want to do it, but had to do something. Burned up half a dozen houses, more or less, and we had to put a stop to it."

He was a lean, leather-faced Yankee, beaten by years of winds. One by one the men on the floor were sitting up.

"Had to put a stop to it," repeated the chief. "Can't have these roughnecks running the town. These fellers from New York and Boston think they're pretty smart. Well, they got to be smarter. They can't chase women and children round the streets of this town. Haven't got many houses here. No wood to build any more without we get it from the mainland. Can't afford to have the town burned down by every Tom, Dick and Harry."

He went on and on with the story—how the first fight started; how the streets ran riot; how he saw it was going to be worse before it was better and gathered his men; how the doctor was shot; how the outnumbered invaders occupied two houses and started sniping, but had only pistols and no accuracy outside of short range; how the townsmen had got control.

"Why didn't you send for help?" asked Burton.

"Did," replied the chief. "Then somebody cut the cable to the mainland."

"Is there no way to talk to the mainland now?"

"Only by mail."

"Who owns the motor-boat at the wharf?"

The lean Yankee shifted the cigar butt between his teeth. "I'm 'bout goin' t'own it myself," he remarked.

"What's it worth to put me on the mainland?"

The chief looked at Burton and looked at Lieutenant Jenkins and hesitated.

"This man wants to get ashore as quickly as possible," Jenkins said briskly. "We can take care of your town for you for a while if you want to make the trip." He looked around the room. "There may be some men here the skipper will be glad to see," he remarked.

"Well," meditated the chief to Burton, "Maybe I can take you. I been wanting to try out that motor boat. I guess there won't be much trouble 'bout my running her. When do you want to start?"

"Right away," urged Burton.

"Guess I'd better get a few hours sleep first," went on the chief. "Had a pretty hard night. Twenty dollars too much for the trip?"

"Fifty if you start now," said Burton. The leathery face of the chief warmed. "Want to go pretty bad, don't you?" he remarked. "Well, I can sleep when I get back."

Chief's rifle and all, away they went. They tramped down the wharf to where the destroyer lay, lifting and falling on the swell. The first man Burton saw was his prisoner who was sitting on the deck with his back to a combing and adorned with leg irons. Near him stood a boatswain's mate grinning.

"Found some decorations for him," remarked the boatswain's mate, still grinning.

Burton grinned back and looked at his watch. It was half past seven in the morning. Half past seven and fifteen miles from a wire and copy time three o'clock in the afternoon.

"I'm in a hurry," he said. "Want to give me a hand?"

As the quickest thing to do, they swung the prisoner up between them and lifted him down into the power boat. The chief climbed wearily down himself and had a look at the gasoline supply and fussed with this gadget and that.

"This is an easy one to run," he commented. "Fast, too. Ready?"

Burton fended off and the big motors turned over with the dull roar of the kind of engine that is designed to develop full power from the jump of the spark. They swept outward and past the destroyer, past the end of the wharf, toward the open sea that suddenly became more formidable for their greater nearness to it. The prisoner had recovered from his misadventures of the morning. He looked disreputable enough and he had a bandage around his head, but his clothes were dry and he was able to speak. He not only spoke, but cursed. He cursed Burton, he cursed the chief, he cursed the destroyer and the leg irons and the sea. Whenever he thought of anything previously forgotten he cursed that, too. But as the roll and pitch increased he spoke less and then he ceased to speak at all, but turned white and then a pale and ghastly green. Burton felt sorry for the man. The leathery chief eyed him with a tired humor.

"Tell me more about the fighting after the fire started," Burton suggested to the chief.

"Well, said the chief, "Three of us come round the corner—"

He was off on his fragmentary story again, but he had a sense of the dramatic as so many New Englanders do, and Burton could see the picture as the tale went on. The boat was rolling and climbing long green waves. The chief talked with his gaze on the lifting hills ahead. From time to time Burton glanced at his watch. The shackled prisoner groaned and was sick.

IT WAS half past eight when the sea flattened out behind the shelter of the harbor at Arnold. They had not come as fast as they might have done in less of wind and seaway. It was twenty minutes of nine when the chief maneuvered the power boat to the dock. Burton had moved the prisoner into the cabin by this time. He wasn't seeking the attention of such members of the public as he could see along the water front.

"Chief," he asked, "do you know the telegraph operator in this town?"

"Say I do," exploded the chief. "No use for him nor he for me. He's an old fool. Most unaccommodating man I ever knew. Wonder to me the company puts up with him, but he's been here since the year one."

"What about the chief of police here?" questioned Burton.

"'Nother old fool. Can't get along with him neither. Nobody can."

"That's too bad," regretted Burton. "Do you happen to know whether the chief and the telegraph operator are friends?"

"Thicker'n thieves," replied the chief.

"That's good. Chief, can you spare the time to wait here until I find out if the telegraph office is open?"

"Well—I ought to be getting back. Sure, I'll wait."

So Burton climbed up the dock and started on a fast jog for the main street where, like a good newspaper man, he remembered having seen the telegraph office. As he approached the door a man was coming out, an elderly man with white hair.

"Hey!" called Burton.

The man paid no attention. He was carefully locking the door. Burton increased his speed. He laid a hand on the old man's arm.

"I've got some press to send," he exclaimed. "Are you the operator?"

"You've got some what?" The face that turned on the reporter was like soured stone.

"Newspaper matter. Two or three thousand words of it."

"Can't you see the office is closed?"

"It's worth ten dollars to me to have it opened."

The stone face grew sourer.

"I get my salary from the company," said the old man. "You'll find the office open at two o'clock in the afternoon." He began to move down the street.

"Say," called Burton, "Where can I find the chief of police?"

The retreating figure paid no attention. Burton looked quickly up and down the street. Then he ran toward the nearest telephone sign whose blue and white hung outside a drug store. He entered the store and found a booth.

"Number, please," requested the operator.

"This is an emergency!" commanded Burton. "I want police headquarters."

Immediately he heard the ringing signal. A gruff, "Hello."

"I want to speak to the chief," said Burton.

"Who is it wants to speak to him?"

"Are you looking for a man who has killed somebody?"

"We sure are," boomed the voice sharpening to alert interest.

"All right, let me speak to the chief about him."

The wire developed a series of clicks and Burton heard a deeper voice. "This is the chief of police," it said.

"Look here," said Burton, "I am a newspaper man. I hear you are looking for a murderer. Now if I can get your friend the telegraph operator to open up a wire for me I think I can find your man for you. There is a reward, I hear." He didn't know whether there was or not.

"There certainly is," said the chief. "A thousand dollars."

"How do we split?" laughed Burton. "Fifty-fifty?"

"If you've got the man, bring him in here," said the chief.

"Oh, not at all," retorted Burton.

"Hold the line."

"Oh no, Chief. Not while you locate me and send an officer here. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll split four ways with you instead of fifty-fifty. You see, the man happens to be in the custody of the chief of police of Woodland at this moment, but he is willing to do as I say. And I have a friend, a chauffeur, who gets part of it. But I've got to have that wire."

The chief's voice chuckled.

"Two-fifty is better than nothing," it said. "I guess I can fix you up for the wire. I'll meet you at the telegraph office in five minutes."

Burton, dripping with sweat, stepped out of the booth. For the first time since he had awakened in his hotel in the night he breathed with relief. He bought cigarets and inhaled deeply. Then he walked across to the telegraph office. Two figures were coming down the street, one resplendent in blue and gold, the other the old man of the sour stone face. The chief was talking persuasively to his companion. Burton smiled on them.

"Will you set up a wire to the Stormboro *Chronicle*, please," he urged, "while the Chief and I take a walk?"

The old man nodded sourly.

"If the chief wants you to have it, I guess you can," he said grudgingly.

It was five minutes later when they came back. There were two chiefs now and the prisoner whose leg irons had been exchanged for bracelets that nipped him to the wrists of the chiefs. The prisoner was as well as could be expected. He was cursing again.

"Your wire is ready," the old operator informed Burton. "I don't suppose I can read your writing. There ain't no typewriter here."

"Is the wire looped into the *Chronicle* office?" asked Burton.

The old man nodded affirmatively, irritated.

"No sense in it," he said. "They're waiting and you haven't written your message. How do you think I can hold this wire?"

"Say," broke in the leathery chief from the island of Woodland, "S'pose you hadn't got this wire, you'd been stuck, wouldn't you?"

Burton glanced down at his wrist and laughed.

"I was only just beginning," said he turning to the operator. The pulse in his forehead was hardly visible; the news had subdued the beat of time. The men were watching him with the interest that people are so likely to give to newspapers in the making. All except the prisoner who was expressing himself again.

"You needn't worry about my writing," Burton reassured the old operator. "I'm not going to write. I'm going to dictate it to you."

He lit a cigaret and sighed forth a long thin stream of smoke.

"Nine forty-five," he said, looking at his wrist, "are you ready? All right. Here goes:

"Arnold, March 16—"

There was plenty of time for the first edition.

GENERALISSIMO

A Complete Novelette

by David R. Sparks

WHEN he was sober his eyes were the finest feature of his face—blue eyes with a gratifying dark steadiness of gaze that backed up the suggestion of power in his straight nose and the rough shag of his yellow hair. It was in his too wide and too loose, his altogether unformed mouth that the sign of his weakness lay.

All this when Gray was sober. Of late he had been seldom sober. Tonight he was drunker even than usual. Not that it mattered much, either to Gray or to the members of the Spanish Club in Curaçao where he went most often to drink. As his debauches increased in their number and extent the habitués of the Curaçao Club merely shrugged, leaving him to drink alone. For they said of the youngster—Gray was only twenty-four—that he had been from the start one of "those cases." Which meant succinctly that Gray would no doubt be presently without funds as well as friends, and take to the beach. Therefore why should it matter if he were drunker than usual tonight?

To Gray himself, as he sat there in the shadowed gallery on the second floor of the club, nothing mattered. Of that he was quite certain. He had used his best logic, backed by a working knowledge of the writings of certain of the classical philosophers including Schopenhauer, to prove that nothing mattered. What counted now was that he should gain Nirvana. If he could not think himself into the Divine Nothingness, he must drink himself into it.

Gray had only the shortest of histories. For a spell in the War he had been a field gunner, and had done well at it—exceedingly well—as he did at most things requiring either scholarly intelligence or individual dexterity and skill. But in time they made him a lieutenant, and trouble came. With startling promptness it became apparent that Gray was the most brilliant and least capable lieutenant in several regiments. He got through the War. They did not strip him of his rank. They took his spirit instead. He had been unable to command men, and it seemed that a whole Army knew it and made him its butt.

Just at this critical time, when he came home to Ohio, it was of vast importance that some one who knew men should have looked Gray over and said:

"It won't do for you to go on this way. You're all right. They made a goat of you in Service, did they? Too bad, but forget it. You shouldn't have been a lieutenant for several years still. Why? Because you are of the kind that comes late to maturity. Because until you do reach maturity you won't be able to take hold of anything and run it. There's nothing wrong with you at all. You've got a first rate body and a first rate mind. The only thing is that your character hasn't crystallized. Late maturity. That's what is behind all this. But wait, and remember that it is your kind that seems to have the knack of running everything once you get on your feet. When your times does come, you'll find yourself able to take command right enough. Take it easy now. And quit being so —— introspective. Your time will come. When it does it will be with a rush."

Instead of telling Gray that, his father, a peppery magnate with side-whiskers, put him in charge of the producing end of the foundry. The producing end went to pot in six months. There was an interview. Gray resigned.

So he had come to the Caribbean, an avowed searcher after Nirvana. And so, after a devious pilgrimage, he had drifted to the South American northern coast, and presently to Willemstadt in the little island of Curaçao.

There he sat in the gallery on the second floor of the Spanish Club. He was very drunk tonight, and batted and blinked his eyes in an involuntary struggle to keep them from seeing double. Nothing mattered. He felt that he was close to the attainment of his goal of the great Nothingness. Presently, in the dark, he reached out his hand and found that his glass was empty.

Drowsily from the inner rooms of the club hummed the sound of many discreetly modulated conversations in which French was mingled with Spanish and English with Dutch; and such was the spirit of the club that even the clicking of billiard balls with which the talk was punctuated seemed discreet. The billiard and lounge rooms, the bar, were all brightly lighted. The gallery with its iron railing and ghostlike marble tables was dark and, save by Gray and two men at its far end, deserted.

From the hazy, starlit mountains that loomed vast above the island port, a warm night wind crept down and breathed through its tangled streets. It was after nine, so that lights had begun to disappear in the gabled bedroom windows of Willemstadt's Dutch houses. In the harbor, which, canal-like, cut through the heart of the town, ships' lights, too, went out. The cobbled streets were almost silent, but from beneath the gallery, close to the dark water, sounded still an occasional burst of laughter that rose shrill and sweet in the tropical night.

Gray had raised his hands, intending to summon a waiter, when from amongst the shadows a club boy, noiseless on bare feet, glided up to him. Instead, however, of standing to receive an order, the mulatto touched Gray upon the shoulder.

"Señor," he breathed in Spanish, "there are two gentlemen who present their compliments to Señor Gray, and request that he will speak with them."

"Two gen'lem'n?"

"*Sí, señor.*"

"Wanna speak 'ith me?"

"*Sí, señor.* If Señor Gray will take my arm—"

"Go 'way. Can walk good's anybody."

Gray got on his feet, steadying himself against a table.

"Where?"

The boy pointed, and Gray stumbled toward the table far down the gallery where the two men awaited his coming. It had been a month since anyone save the houseboys in the club had really spoken to him. A month! In spite of himself, in spite of his vows taken almost in that moment that he was glad and did not care, Gray's throat tightened. He wished he were not so drunk. Realizing then that he did wish it, he swore at himself. Why should it matter? Nothing mattered.

The gallery stretched empty and dark ahead of him. Then he found himself in a chair with a slim, icy-cold glass in his hand. The one face across the table from him was merely that of a stockily built man with angular features, coarse skin, long black hair and brooding eyes. But the other—Gray started. The other seemed to be a cold, green face with a terrible nose, sharp and long, like the blade of a jade knife. Of course, Gray told himself, he had been fooled. It was the liquor in his glass that was green. People did not have green faces. People had brown faces. This man's face was brown. But that long sharp nose! And the mustachios—pure white—with upturned points of bristling, wild hair that stretched like a feline's whiskers out and out into the gloom!

THE green drink—whatever it was—sent a little shiver down Gray’s spine. He knew that he must not talk much. He must fix his attention upon these men. Old Green Face— No, not Green Face. Green Liquor and Brown Face—that was it. Old Brown Face, from behind his white mustachios, had begun to talk. Gray heard himself asked if he were willing to pledge secrecy, and bobbed his head in a wobbly affirmative, guessing that the man’s name would come next. He must remember.

“Señor Gray,” he heard, “I am Miguel Gomez. This is Ramon Mendoza. We are of the opposition party in that Republic nearest to the south of us.”

“Gomez. Mendoza. Opposition.”

Gray clung desperately to the three words. Opposition. So that was it! He muttered something about being honored, and felt about on the table for another of the green drinks. No drink there. Gomez’s face slid closer.

“Presently you shall have a drink. Señor Gray, we have understood that recently you served your country as an artilleryman.”

“Artillery. Gray.”

He nodded with the beginnings of a strange, sick feeling tugging at his heart. Somehow, at the outset, he had half expected this. Dismembered memories began to stir, and he found that they hurt. What was coming? What jest was being played upon him now, that a man with long, sharp nose and white mustachios should approach him with talk of soldiering?

Gomez was speaking again, and Gray had missed some of the words; something about a small force of men in the hills far behind Willemstadt—patriots who were to be trained there secretly and thence transported to the mainland.

“And having recruited these men,” Gomez concluded, “we desire an officer. One to take command of our entire force.”

At that announcement Gray started, was conscious of the electric burst of his surprize. An officer to take command of all their forces?

“Please—repeat—that,” he gasped.

“We need, señor, a generalissimo.”

“You nee’ gen’alissimo?”

“*Sí, señor.*”

“Gen’alissimo?”

“Señor Gray, will you consider our offer of the command?”

This jest! This Gargantuan jest!

Gray gagged suddenly to stop a rush of sodden, grim laughter. He was not laughing at Gomez and Mendoza. No. It was at the idea of Gray being a general that he wanted to howl.

Gray, the shavetail who had been unable to keep a single platoon in hand—a general! Gray, whose own father had cursed him for being a failure in such a manner that the boy had left a million dollar business for good and all—Gray, a general!

“You will consider this matter, señor?”

Gray swayed forward, half across the table. He raised his voice as loudly as he dared in the gallery of that discreet club.

“Consider it, ——! I—accep’!”

A cold sweat drenched his face. He did not dare to give way to his mirth, but laughed dreadfully to himself. After that he found another of the green drinks in his hand. He raised it to his lips while Mendoza—Mendoza the silent—and Gomez, too, gave low cries of—

“*Viva! Viva el señor generalissimo!*”

For a few minutes longer then the talk went on in his ears, but he could not answer. The last green drink had been one too many. His senses failed him. Upon the table he folded his arms and laid his head upon them. He slept.

Mendoza stirred, tamping a cigaret, and extending a lighted match toward Gomez.

“But, *sangre de Dios*, Gomez, what a man! You can not possibly use this fellow!”

“To the contrary, my dear Mendoza—” Gomez’s voice was cool and level—“he suits our requirements perfectly. Consider: Our patriot who is willing to put up money to fight a war that will make him President—our patriot refuses to advance another *bolivar* of money until we provide our army with a commander. Now some commanders I might have hired would, no doubt, have become troublesome to me when, in the fulness of time, they learned that your plans and mine, Mendoza, do not coincide so very—ah—exactly with those of our so foolish patriot. In any critical moment this sodden dupe will do *my* bidding. But come, let us drive him up to the hacienda tonight.”

AS GRAY had fallen asleep with the sound of Gomez's voice in his ears, so it was in his ears when he awoke. A little sunshine filtered into the lofty bedroom in which he found himself, but it was still the thin gold of earliest morning light. A barefoot negro wearing the white jacket of a house-servant was placing a decanter of cognac and a cup of black coffee on a table at his bedside, and Gomez, freshly clad in white drill, stood above him holding out what were obviously the tunic and breeches of a dress uniform.

On each shoulder of the tunic, in the center of the gold and scarlet epaulets, glinted a silver star. Sick and glassy-eyed though he was, Gray saw that and sat up.

"Only a makeshift uniform, señor, which I picked up some time ago. It will serve, however, for the present."

Uncomprehendingly Gray took the tunic in his hands, while with what might have been a sympathetic smile Gomez continued:

"In case the señor fails to remember, we brought him here last night—"

But Gray foggily recalled the motor and the long drive up into the hills.

"Come, señor, I am sorry to disturb you so early, but our small troops are ready to be taken over."

Gray filled the cup at his bedside with equal portions of cognac and steaming coffee, gulped it, and began to dress. Completely in a daze he found himself putting on the gorgeous raiment, which seemed to fit him perfectly.

And he was still in a daze when he found himself standing between Gomez and Mendoza at the veranda rail, facing a collection of some twoscore eager-faced nondescripts of various shades of brown. Suddenly he heard the voice of Gomez at his side proclaiming grandiloquently:

"Patriots! Soldiers! I present to you *el Señor Generalissimo!*"

Almost as though this were a scene in a melodrama, greasy caps were thrown into the air, ragged arms waved, and the rabble shouted.

"*Viva el Señor Generalissimo!*"

Gray was conscious of Gomez gripping his arm and whispering.

"Now, señor, say something. Tell them —tell them anything. You must make them a speech!"

Make a speech? His brain lay in his skull like a mildewed sponge. As yet he scarcely comprehended what this was about. Then came a flash of remembrance that he was the central figure of a Gargantuan jest. Once more over Gray burst a wave of terribly ironic hilarity. For Gray, the sot, had indeed become Gray, the general, and an army awaited his inaugural address. While he struggled with his features came again Gomez's whisper:

"Señor, they are waiting!"

With that, Gray rose to the occasion, dominated by the single thought of the enormousness of the jest.

"Patriots!"

It was an impromptu speech, but his mood swiftly recalled to him every sonorous, grandiloquent phrase of flowery Spanish that had ever sounded ridiculous to his Anglo-Saxon ears.

"Patriots! As the great sun of morning is rising there above the humped gray shoulders of these hills, so is your own sun rising! It is the day, the hour! *Patria* and freedom! The time is at hand when with rifles at your shoulders and the fire of sublimest freedom in your hearts, you will—"

The words were coming easily to Gray. Yet before he ever reached what might have been the terribly funny body of his address, he found himself being overlaid with a curious sense of disquiet.

The men before him were too serious. Their eyes were wide open and eager. Their breasts heaved. Their warm Spanish temperaments were responding enthusiastically to this stimulus of rhetoric. To them this thing was no joke.

The wave of ironic humor which had borne him along so far began to be quelled by a cross current of drowning pity. Gray hardly knew when he had first felt the pathos of these scarecrows with whom he had chosen to jest. But the easy, foolish words began to choke in his throat. His flowing periods stuttered lamely. He boggled, and his voice trailed away to nothingness. He turned to Gomez.

"But, my God, Gomez, these soldiers of yours! They—they look hungry, poor devils. They've got no clothes. Where do you house them? What have they—"

Gomez's shrug and suave smile interrupted the outburst.

"But, Señor General, this is not the point! How should I know about these things?

You were doing splendidly. Go on. Feed them on glory!"

"Feed them! Good Lord, haven't these men had breakfast yet?"

Gomez's shrug was the acme of unconcern.

"But, señor, how should I know? I am no quartermaster. I—"

Gray turned sharply from him, and with beckoning finger singled out an excited yellow face in the front of the throng. The soldier stepped forward.

"*Altissimo!*"

"Have you eaten this morning?"

"No, señor."

Gray paused, and swallowed hard. Then—

"Tell me, what is your usual ration for breakfast?"

"Sometimes, *Altissimo*, it is *cassava* and coffee. Most often, *cassava* and water."

"That will do, patriot." Gray raised his voice. "All of you, go to your breakfast. I will see to it that you have coffee and, if possible, some meat. I will talk to you when you have fed."

Gomez viewed Gray's action with an even, cool smile. He went so far as to nod his head in approval. Mendoza, however, took it differently. The brooding look in his eyes assumed a new intensity.

"A dupe?" he asked himself.

Unmindful of either of them, forgetful, for the moment, of his own breakfast, Gray followed in the wake of his men. In an empty carriage house he found a greasy table around which the men were crowding. The cook-house was a small building outside. There Gray ordered a suspicious, half-insolent cook to prepare coffee at once, and himself located the storeroom whence he dragged a slab of salt meat.

It was a very sober Gray who returned to the kitchen to superintend the preparation of the meal. It was real, then! When he had fallen to the bottom of all things, the gods had flung him the greatest chance of his life. And they had not meant to jest! To be sure, his was only a chance. In his first look to the future he saw nothing but hazard, no certainty of any kind. Assuming that he could play the whole man's part, upon what desperations would not the revolution hinge? Assuming that the revolution might win, could he play the man? Could he? It was all just one vast chance. But when the gods give mortals chances, they do not push them out on silver platters.

"By golly," he said aloud, so that the cook turned toward him an ogre's eye, "it *is* my chance. Schopenhauer was a —— fool. Everything matters. I'm going through with this."

His next thought followed immediately as a solid one on ways and means. He would have to stop drinking. Not next week. Not tomorrow. Now. Could he? He knew that he had been drinking deliberately to gain a certain end. Faced with another end, the attainment of which, among other things, demanded prohibition, could he stop? He rubbed his hands interestingly through the shag of his yellow hair.

"Gosh, I'm not that far gone," he said.

He would have to work. The harder he worked and the more he sweated, the less he would mind the craving which already made itself felt. Thus Gray's mouth set in the first line of determination it had ever assumed. And so set, it ceased to contradict the power suggested by his nose and eyes.

"I'll just get 'em fed, and then I'll see if these buzzards know anything about drill," he told himself.

"THESE buzzards," of whom there were forty—an even five squads—knew considerable about drill. They knew the right foot from the left, the rudiments of company drill in close order, and more than a little of the business of scrabbling along on their bellies in a skirmish line. All of them had fought before. Some of their drill, Gray found, he did not know, and was at a loss about how to proceed until he solved the difficulty by teaching them the drills he knew. Which drills they began to learn rapidly from the first day.

For the rest, it was a curious army. Amongst its personnel not a uniform was to be seen. The men without exception, being shoeless, went barefoot. Their only clothing consisted of the ragged shirts and tattered pants which fall to the lot of a peon. As yet they had no arms. And the men themselves were just an underfed revolutionary rabble whose faces were yellow and black and brown with never a white face amongst them.

Gray had not spent many hours with them before he learned a good deal about the problem which confronted him. Or many days before he made a vast discovery about himself.

He was thinking ahead one night to the matters with which he would have to deal should he ever lead these men in battle, when he found suddenly that as a general, he was the greatest incompetent who had ever worn stars. He had been priding himself upon the visible signs of work accomplished with his men, upon the fact that though his nerves jerked, he had not taken a drink since his first resolve. A moment later his pride had been smashed hopelessly by that intuitive knowledge of what qualities must be embodied in him before he would make even a fair captain, much less a general. Gray simply pitched out of his clouds to his first realization of existent fact.

What had he done? He had taught forty men something about drill. These same men had obeyed him faithfully for a few days. Nevertheless, did he have command? Gray thought hurriedly and fearfully of some tiny incidents he had tried to overlook. Could it be that the men were responding to his orders now because of their unconscious gratitude for the care he had taken of them? Would they, when they learned to take their bettered condition for granted, present a new face?

For a space Gray was shaken, and shaken badly, by this discovery of his present incompetency to meet what would almost certainly become future demands upon him. The feeling was presently quelled, however, and then for all time put away from him, by a reflection which soothed his mind like balm.

In two ways he found himself changed. A spirit of determination altogether new had compelled him to win the fight against himself. And one other change, the nature of which he did not at all understand, but which permeated his whole being, and which overnight had transformed a morbid, fool boy into an interestedly working man, had given him his first grip upon forty men.

It came to Gray that circumstance aided by his own efforts had made him into one of the best sergeants obtainable in any army.

A sergeant! In the first rush of his discovery he knew that whatever titles he had borne in the Army, in his father's business, or might bear now, this one of sergeant which secretly he gave himself was the only one that had ever fitted.

To himself he said:

"I'm a sergeant. All the —— stars in the world can't make me a general. Not now. But look, this much has come to me in a week. If it is possible for me to conceive—which it is—the *modus operandi* of generalship, can I not execute the conception in fact? I can. Hm— Hm. First, though, I'll have to take a slant at being a captain."

WITH this definite knowledge of what he was and was not, Gray faced his second week. From the start he had been gratified to find how quickly his men fell into the ways of maneuvering. Now, however, he had begun to wonder at the fact that, while skirmishing came naturally, it was hard to get them to work in close order. Gray did not like it. He knew that being natural born fighters, they liked skirmishing, and therefore skirmished beautifully. He suspected that they skirmished so well not because of his commanding personality, but in spite of it. Meanwhile their foot drill was becoming almost unrecognizable as such. Gray began to be haunted by an I. D. R. precept to the effect that every exercise in deployment must be followed by movements in close order lest natural born fighters lose the discipline of machine-made soldiers, and revert to the primitive. It was no use lying to himself. He had not been following that precept. He had been evading it.

Next afternoon Gray put them through a long siege of field work. At the end, the men, expectant with the instinct of truck horses bound for their stalls, were headed up in a sloppy column of squads toward the veranda and dismissal when Gray bawled:

"Column left! March!"

The column came around, even advanced on across the field. As quickly, however, as Gray could think, he knew that the line was wobbling. Running ahead of the column, he broke the chant of his marching count with a sharp cry to cover off. He perceived that of the many glances turned toward him, a few were patient, but most were sullen, and some were evil. His shout passed unheeded. No one moved to straighten the line. They were beginning to understand that extra duty was expected of them. Their reaction was simple, swift, and characteristic of their kind. Without the passage of a word down the ranks, instantly and instinctively, they steeled themselves to resistance. A muttering arose in their rear. Gray felt a swift giddiness overtake him in the pit of his stomach. Then before he could think of any word to say that would check the growing disturbance, he saw a lanky devil named Diego grin and deliberately change his step. The man in Diego's rear stumbled over the outflung foot, and instantly the whole formation collapsed.

"Oh, lord, what have I got into now?" Gray gasped. He caught a huge breath and commanded, "Company— Halt!"

All the breath in Gray's lungs went into his shout. The company responded in spite of itself.

"Diego!"

There was a movement in the region of greatest disturbance, and Diego grinned from behind the shoulders of his fellows.

"Yes, you! Fall out. Come here!"

Diego shambled forward, still grinning after a not too conciliatory fashion. In the almost dreadful instant while Gray waited for the man to be before him he pondered helplessly his next move. Every other sergeant in the world could have shoved Diego into a guard house. Could he? He could not. If there had been a guard house, Diego would probably not have chosen to go there. Gray found no answer to the question, but he did find himself suddenly hot with anger. Then Diego stood there.

"*Altissimo*, I present myself."

"—— you, wipe that grin off your face. Salute!"

DIEGO did not salute. Instead, he lifted his cap, rubbed his hand over his greasy shock head, and after eyeing Gray speculatively, dropped the cap to the ground with a peculiar gesture of finality.

"Pick up that cap, Diego."

"But, señor, I am tired. I mean with the cap that I am finished. I can not be a soldier any more today. Tomorrow—"

"Pick up that cap!"

The whole of the company had begun to shuffle closer.

"Pick up that cap!"

Diego began slowly to turn his back on Gray. While he swung, Gray threw out a detaining hand to his shoulder. At the same instant there was a swift movement amongst the pack before him. Whether it was a planned move or an impromptu one he never knew. He looked up to find himself surrounded by a ring of half a dozen men at whose heels swarmed the company.

No guard house. No government to put them in a house if there had been one. He faced the situation blankly. Then it was that one primitive thought—a thought as stark as any of the unleashed passions of his men—gripped him, pushed him to the climax of his mounting anger. If he couldn't handle men, by God, no men could handle him.

His hand slipped from Diego's shoulder. Diego swaggered for a second, leered, and stepped into the close-drawn circle of belligerents.

There was a moment of confused pause. His one chance now was to face them and hold them with commands. Yet these men were a mob. How could he face his men when they were all around him? He tried, discovering too late that he had made a wrong move. He essayed the impossible task of facing in all directions at once, and only succeeded in dissipating completely the force of his command.

"Back to your ranks, you swine! Fall in! You, Diego—"

A grimy, vile brown hand swinging from behind squashed the words against his mouth. He turned to face this assault, and immediately half a dozen ill-aimed blows fell on his neck and shoulders.

Gray knew then that he was up against more than a passing insubordination. While that first blow had been no more than a nervous manifestion of a disgruntled man of excitable temperament, the others meant more than that. Having been accessories to the first attack, the mob had fallen victims to the awful panic which causes frightened men to carry a first misdemeanor to its final excess.

Gray was no skilled boxer. Nevertheless he had an ordinary American's athletic ability; and it is just that heritage which places the Anglo-Saxon at an advantage in a rough and tumble fight. It came just as naturally to Gray to hit straight and hard with his fists as it came to his Latins to strike with knives. By the grace of God they had no weapons. Their blows were weak, chopping, and ineffectual.

Gray was no motion picture hero. Even with the advantage of his youth and strength and clean hitting, he could not have stood for long against his whole five squads. But in no mob are all the members equal participants. In this case, not more than six or eight were ringleaders. The rest were willing to stand back and yelp.

Accordingly when Gray smashed his fist into the face of the man who had struck him first, he was able at once to wheel and batter at those who clawed at him from behind: He fought now in a haze. The natural resentment of the white man at being manhandled surged up in him to fury. Somebody went down before him.

Somebody was clutching at his knees. He realized desperately that once down he was lost. He kicked blindly at what he could not see. A howl came from below, and he found himself able to plant his feet securely. That kicking was effective. He kicked and stamped again, grimly thankful for his other advantage of boots against bare feet and shins. Those who pressed on him from in front drew back from this onslaught, giving him space to swing his fists again. Another went down. He was able to attend to a man who seemed to be trying to climb up his back. He was stepping on soft lumpy things that squirmed, and his footing was once more desperately insecure. He felt himself tripping. And then all of a sudden he stood free. He wheeled again to meet the expected rear attack. But behind him were only two men who pressed back against the outer circle which pressed forward.

Gray knew that he had won. Though he did not know until later how much he had won. All the carefully instilled precepts of the I. D. R. had vanished from his mind. He was just dominant man against lesser men. He advanced truculently upon the shrinking herd before him.

"Now then. Fall in!"

The pack was beaten and knew it. A line strangely straight began to form.

"Fall in!" Gray roared.

A couple still groveled on the ground, groaning. With boot and hands he boosted them to their feet.

"Get into your ranks, you! Dress up, there! Cover to the right. Number three, second squad, back— Number six—Miguel—suck up your belly! Count off!"

Gray faced a company of subdued men, frightened at what they had done, and fearful of consequences. But he only said to them:

"Men, you are a pack of —— fools. Dismissed!"

Gray returned to his quarters with a feeling of—he did not know what. He surveyed himself ruefully in a mirror above his washstand. A cut under his eye needed sticking plaster. There was a warm stickiness, too, at the back of his neck. He felt of it with a good American oath, and pulled off his tunic and shirt. Not until he was sluicing himself in the giddily painted basin did the realization begin to soak into his consciousness that he had won more than just a rough and tumble fight. He knew now what he had only half guessed before, that leadership meant more than being the empty mouthpiece of a system of discipline backed up by a guard house.

Command was a matter of personal ascendency. Why could he not have found himself in this way in that other Army? He wrinkled his nose slightly at the jabbing pain of his memory. But a moment later, as he swabbed at a bruise on his head, he grinned.

"I guess you've got hold of your men now, Captain Gray," he chuckled.

IT WAS something of this same thought that Mendoza was expressing to Gomez at that moment in the drawing room.

"I tell you, *amigo*, that we have been mistaken in this man. That first night, I did not think there was left in him enough spark to make him even your tool. That wrong judgment I began to mend next morning. I beg you to mend yours now. He is not the man for our purpose."

"He continues, Mendoza, to suit my purpose exactly."

"*Amigo*, you are wrong. Look you, I have seen this Señor Gray's kind before. He is a type. The *gringo* universities turn out always some like him. A very complicated type, my dear Gomez. Its peculiar characteristic is that its members lie inert long after other men are fully bloomed. Then they go off— Boom!—like one big gun. Boom! And they come to themselves. Afterward nothing checks them. Inevitably they become a force in their land."

Gomez smoothed his white mustachios with cool upward strokes of his fingers. If Gray's final assumption of command had clouded his eye for a moment, his satisfaction over the progress of his own plans had brightened it at once.

"Mendoza, you become absurd."

He turned decisively, and moved away to the dining room.

Mendoza, however, remained, lingering with his meditations as long as he dared. Two thoughtful wrinkles crept across his swarthy forehead. He made little clucking sounds with his tongue. To Mendoza it began to seem that this business was becoming very full of unexpected hazards. He began to think that he might profit most from it by forsaking Gomez's interests for his own.

Next day Mendoza was watching Gray's maneuvers with his thin skirmish line, when Gomez's motor drew up to the veranda and Gomez, powdered white with the dust of the steep road from Willemstadt, hurried into the house.

"Mendoza! Mendoza!" he called, then finding him in the drawing room: "Our rifles have arrived, together with bayonets and complete ammunition! All will be delivered here to-night."

Momentarily Mendoza was swayed to enthusiasm and flung his arms about excitedly. But a reserve, which he tried to conceal from Gomez, soon descended upon him involuntarily.

"And the field rifle?" he inquired.

"A Hotchkiss gun. Ready, and, as was specified, waiting at our landing place below Arita. We will have to move it only twenty-five kilometres, through deserted country, to gain the hacienda Moreira."

"Have you drawn out Señor Gray's opinion as to how soon he can make ready his men?"

"He says a week of drilling with rifles in their hands will suffice. All of the men can shoot. Moreover, he says all of these, being what he calls 'niggers,' will take naturally to cutting. He expects them to be most proficient with the bayonet."

"And the field rifle?"

"He knows the piece. He has one man—that Sanchez—who will act as gunner. In an emergency, he says he can work the piece himself."

There was a moment of silence during which Gomez smiled amusedly to himself.

"Señor Gray," he said, "knows that with his nucleus of forty men, we go to the mainland, there to take over a larger body who will await us in camp. He knows our first action will be the capture of a certain hacienda Moreira. Of the ultimate purpose for which we capture this hacienda, he knows nothing. He believes its capture will mark merely the first advance of a most beautiful and noble revolution."

Mendoza relaxed in his chair and let his eyes wander once more across the field toward Gray and his forty soldiers.

"*Bueno*, Mendoza," concluded Gomez, "a sloop sails for Guayara to-night which will land you at Arita. My agent there awaits you with his recruits—a hundred odd. You will see that the field gun is delivered, and you will bring the Arita recruits quietly out and encamp them in the place beside the lake, to await our arrival. Ourselves, we should land two weeks from to-morrow morning. I leave you now to your preparations for departure."

THAT evening Gray came to the dining room in so exhausted a state that he could scarcely keep his eyes open over his soup. But his enthusiasm ran high.

"I tell you," was his constant theme to Gomez, "I've got those johnnies where I want 'em. For a rabble they are certainly taking on form."

While the soup dishes were being removed, he broke off to ask—

"Hello, where's Mendoza?"

"He has sailed for Arita to-night."

"What's that? You mean he's already gone?"

"*Sí, señor*. The sloop in which he takes passage sails at eight."

Gray's tiredness fell from him like a discarded old coat, and he sat up straight.

"Wow!" he exclaimed, "that's *talking!*"

Gomez then named the date he had set for their own departure, and stated that the great patriot who financed him and had given him their present shelter, would return to his hacienda when they had quitted it, thus ending that phase of their business.

"Your rifles, bayonets, and ammunition," he ended, "will be delivered here to-night."

Gray received the news very quietly. Instead of the excitement he thought he ought to feel, he felt only a level confidence in himself. He began coolly to plan. After a long period of silence on both sides—

"Good," said Gray with determination in his voice, "I shall attend to everything which needs to be done in connection with our embarkation. Once we land, I will not waste time trying to do anything with the Arita forces. I will attack at once."

There was serenity in Gray's face, and dignity. Gomez's wonted calm did not desert him as he listened to Gray. But for the first time he was impressed with the man's force. Moreover, he became aware of the thing of which Gray himself had not been conscious: That there had been not the slightest hint on Gray's part of dependence upon or deference toward Gomez.

During the remainder of the meal, Gomez scarcely spoke again. At its conclusion, he rose abruptly and stalked moodily out to the veranda. It was with long, thoughtful puffs that he lighted his cheroot. There had been that in Gray's demeanor, in his unconscious assumption of complete authority, which moved Gomez all at once to an understanding of Gray's latent power. Was Mendoza right?

The night was windless, hot, black, with its stars blotted out beneath a pall of cloud. As Gomez gazed upward to the inky, somber outlines of the hills, a fear stole over him, which, no matter how slight it might be now, attacked his armor of self-esteem as a drop of corrosive acid attacks steel. An hour passed, and plunged in foreboding as he was, its minutes seemed interminable. Then at last he heard the welcome clatter of burros' hooves out in the night, and the low cries of the muleteers with his rifles. This distraction did not come quite soon enough, however, to save his peace of mind intact, for as he heard Gray coming toward him in the dark, the match flame with which he touched his dead cheroot shivered in his fingers.

EXACTLY fifteen nights later, on another sulfurous black evening, Gomez, Mendoza, and Gray sat at the door of the tent which comprised Gray's headquarters in the field. In the clearing before them, Gray's own patrol, together with the hundred recruits from Arita, sat in restless groups, their supper done, their cook fires dying.

The camp site lay on the swampy western shore of Lake Guayara, the mouth of which opens to the Caribbean. Behind the hastily constructed shelters of the men, stretched two miles of dreary swamp, at the end of which a broad, desolate plain reached almost to the horizon before it was first broken by a purple sweep of hills.

Out on that plain, twenty-five kilometres away lay the vast cocoa estate, the hacienda Moreira, which was Gray's objective.

The fading gleam of the fires draped the camp in mysterious, wavering shadows amidst which showed faintly the savage faces of the men and the blued barrels of seven score obsolete Mausers in their stacks. Gomez and Mendoza sat together making small-talk that included Gray, but in which he joined in only a monosyllabic fashion. Sucking at a pipe, he sat on an outspread poncho, his arms wrapped about his updrawn knees, his eyelids narrowed over the hard blue of his eyes as he watched the restless shadows and restless men of his camp.

He was ready to march next morning. The rifles with filled bandoliers had been issued; such assimilation of his new forces with his old as could be effected in a day was done; Gray had traversed the path through the swamp and inspected the little Hotchkiss One Sixty-Five field rifle concealed at its end—a one-pounder gun, old, but in first rate condition, a piece with which Gray had been well pleased, and upon which he knew he could depend.

Hard and clear as were Gray's eyes on the surface, they had come to contain a portentious, smoky depth beneath their surface that was completely indicative of the change in Gray. Beyond that his face had changed little—was only brown instead of pasty, and lean, with a taut jaw instead of a slack.

His single great thought as he sat watching his men was—

"Will they follow?"

If his promotion of himself from sergeant to captain had been half facetious, he knew now that he had earned the rank. But captain was still a long way from generalissimo Would he be able to skip his majority and colonelcy, and become the general in one leap? Well, tomorrow would show. Would these men whom he had trained follow him in action? Even if he could command his men, had he brains enough, canniness, daring, and courage, to plan and execute any campaign that bore the earmarks of generalship? On those two points his fate hung.

Deep as he was in thought, it was Gray and not the others who first heard a slight commotion. He stood up, peering into the gloom.

Toward them across the clearing scuttled a man who almost flung himself upon Gomez.

"Señor, for ——'s sake! You are undone! Your plan is known!"

He was a small man, with piercing eyes like a chicken hawk's. From his chin down he was mud-smeared, and while he sputtered, sweat spurted from the pores of his dark skin. Gray recognized him as Gomez's agent in Arita.

Gomez, aroused on the instant, leaned forward savagely, his hand raised helplessly to check the fellow's outburst.

"In God's name, señor, you must disband! A lieutenant and fifty men from the garrison at Guayara occupy the hacienda!"

Gomez's face blanched, and for a moment he seemed to shrink within himself. At Gray he darted one disconcerted glance and jumped to his feet. To the agent—

"Come with me, you fool! Here!"

Gray, instinctively aware of an emergency, but at a loss to account for the lightning change in Gomez, made a move to follow.

"You will remain here, señor," Gomez commanded him harshly.

Thus they were gone, and Gray found himself staring speechlessly at Mendoza who stared back with the look of a troubled but nevertheless well-satisfied Sphinx.

The sweating little agent never returned. After ten minutes Gray saw him bolt around the edge of the camp and plunge into the black swamp as though he fled in fear of his life. A moment later Gomez came up. His whole body was tense with rage. His nose protruding from between his glittering eyes seemed indeed like the sharp, long blade of a knife.

"Señor Mendoza, we have been sold out. A force of fifty men is at the hacienda."

Savagely then he faced Gray.

"Bury these rifles at once. Disperse the men."

Gray faced him with a surprize that nearly strangled him.

"Disperse the men, señor? Just what do you mean?"

"It is not a time for questions. Drive these men away from here. Destroy the arms."

"Because we are opposed by fifty men, señor?"

Gray's eyes were clouded with anger, and his heart thumped with an excitement that transcended even anger. All that he understood was that he was without reason being deprived of his first great chance to fight.

"You mean to disband—run—because fifty troops and some rabble of peons oppose our one hundred and forty?" he bellowed.

Gomez threw out his hands despairingly.

"But, señor, you do not understand. These are government troops."

Of course Gray did not understand.

"But, Señor Gomez, did we not come to fight government troops?"

Gomez's face was livid.

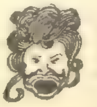
"*Mia madre, señor!* I am not such a fool as to—"

His teeth snapped on the words like a baited animal's. In his excitement he had almost given himself away. He gulped in his effort to control himself.

"It doesn't matter. My order is to disband, and at once. We return to our schooner. Let the men shift for themselves."

Gray felt himself at sea. There was something in all this that he could not understand. But that did not matter to him now. What he did understand was that Gomez was flinging orders at him, ridiculous orders, orders without rhyme or reason. At the thought his smoldering anger boiled over.

"Señor Gomez," he said coldly, "I fear you are not sane. If there are troops at the hacienda, and if they know of our presence, the only thing to do is to surprize them. We march at once!"



GOMEZ yammered unintelligible things and clutched at Gray's sleeve apparently in a frenzy of terror. Gray was astounded at this display of fear. He had not so judged Gomez. Yet this was no time to stand and argue. It was twenty-five kilometres to the hacienda. A thick, black night through which to cross new country. Still, if he marched immediately, he believed he could arrive and place his men for a dawn attack. He shook off the clutching hand on his arm and ran out into the camp. In another moment the screaming blast of his patrol whistle cut the night, and his shouts of command were drowned by all the confused noises of men called unexpectedly to arms.

Gomez was left facing Mendoza across the smoke of their bivouac fire. For a moment he had yammered on, but during the ten minutes which elapsed before Gray's column marched, his self-possession had returned to him almost miraculously. He was once again the cold, hard, calculating man he had been. Very cold and very hard. He shrugged with the finality of a Pilate washing his hands of this affair.

"Well, Señor Mendoza?" he said silkily.

Mendoza remained silent. Gomez's calm was ominous.

"The gringo is gone. Let him go, poor fool. Because you, my friend, remain to me."

Mendoza licked his dry lips and ventured to say:

"We must go after him and tell him."

Gomez shrugged again.

"He doesn't matter. His hastiness has brought his fate upon his own head."

"True. But I think the gringo will win this fight."

Gomez smiled like a panther.

"Still it doesn't matter. He will presently be caught and duly shot as a revolutionist. What matters, my dear friend Mendoza, is that somebody sold us out to Señor Moreira, our *haciendeiro*, and so changed our little plan of banditry into a revolution."

Once again Mendoza's throat froze. Gomez's smile became a cat's snarl.

"It was not that poor fool of an agent who has just run away. Well, then, who else knew?"

Mendoza saw only the menacing face. Gomez's hands were not visible. The paralysis that had gripped Mendoza's tongue chilled his limbs. He knew now that Gomez knew. That terrible Gomez whose great beak thrust out at him like a knife!

The horrible association of ideas released the cramp in his limbs. With a shriek he whirled around to run. But his inertia had lasted just a fraction of a second too long. Gomez's knife-hand came into view. Swiftly as a tree-lynx Gomez lunged across the fire. A lightning-swift arc flashed in the red light. The fingers of his left hand fastened like claws into Mendoza's long black hair, jerked his head back, stretching his throat taut for the knife-stroke.

"Ss-sso," hissed Gomez, "I treat traitors."

Mendoza's shriek ended in a frothy gurgle.

As Mendoza sagged Gomez drove the knife under a twitching arm, and as the body fell he stabbed again. The blood lust was on him.

"Ss-sso," he snarled, and again, "ss-sso, you dog's meat. Sell me out would you?"

He knelt on the inert thing and hacked at it with each snarl of maniac hate.

He was for the moment a jungle beast worrying its kill. Long moments passed before his rage was satiated and reason began to seep back into his inflamed brain. Stealthily he moved back from the body and crouched with raised head and blazing eyes. He gave the impression, almost, of sniffing around for possible menace. But none came to disturb him. Gray had gathered up his men and gone. In the darkness was nothing except the distant confused murmur of retreating men, and their oaths as they splashed and stumbled through the swamp.

Gomez rose to his feet and sent his curses after them. So there went the end of all his planning. The end.

But was it that?

With sudden cunning he began to review the situation. Supposing what that fool of a traitor said was true? Supposing the gringo should win. In that case he, Gomez, would would not be implicated in any revolution.

"*Madre Dios,*" he breathed, "possibly the situation may yet be turned to my advantage!"

His lips began to curl back, and a sound like a purr came from his throat. With careful cat-steps he took up the trail to follow and learn what he might of the affair at the hacienda Moreira.

THE earliest faint light found Gray reconnoitering the hacienda from behind a little hummock of sandstone, almost like a bunker on a golf course, which was the only large cover on the face of the plain. Half a mile away, in full view across the open country, lay the buildings: the great house, the inevitable chapel, the huddled outbuildings, and the long, strongly built shed that contained the wealth of the estate—the season's crop of the famous Moreira cocoa, sacked and stored ready for shipment.

Gray let his eye rove over a sparse fringe of scrub to his right, and nodded approvingly. Within a crumbling wall which surrounded the area of buildings, eight sentries kept listless watch. Not another man stirred.

The light was increasing momentarily. Gray chuckled to himself. This was his reward for his quick decision and forced march. His surprize would be complete.

He wriggled backward off the bunker, called together the men whom he had installed as corporals, and gave them his swift instructions.

"*Amigos*, the good God has delivered this place into our hands. I do not think we shall even need the Hotchkiss gun. We shall carry the place with bayonets. That low scrub to the right will give us cover to crawl to within two hundred yards, and then we shall charge them. But do you, Sanchez, take five men, and when we charge, advance your gun straight forward to a three-hundred-yard range. There await my signal."

Gray drew the other men around him in a body.

"Now then, you men, understand what you've got to do. We crawl on our bellies through that underbrush. Let no man make a sound, and on your lives let no man fire a gun. When I give the word we charge with bayonets. Remember, patriots, the welfare of your country depends upon your valor to-day."

A chorus of whispered "*Vivas!*" acclaimed his talk. A month ago he would have been inspired at their response. The tense figures leaning forward, the dark, eager faces and fierce eyes were those of fighting men. But Gray knew from his association with them that the minds of these men were child minds; that they would respond similarly to anybody's platitudinous rhetoric. His one concern was whether they would follow him now.

He thought that they would, but took the precaution of sprinkling his first patrol of forty men amongst the new numbers of the Arita recruits. Swiftly then he looked to his own pistol, and passed among them, inspecting rifles and bandoliers. Everything was as fit as he could make it. The issue would now depend upon the human material, upon the men and their leader.

"Very well," he said shortly, "Follow!"

He felt no fear of detection before they should reach the end of the scrub. He knew his men were skirmishers. Ten minutes saw them at the extreme edge of the cover. Two hundred yards before them lay the unprotected hacienda. He cast a final glance over his shoulder. He lifted his gold-embroidered cap above his head as a signal, waved it once, and—

"Patriots, charge!" he barked, and leaped to his feet to race out across the open.

For one horrible second he wondered whether he was a misguided fool rushing out to meet death alone. Then he heard a fierce yell behind him, and the patter of hard brown feet on hard brown earth.

Like a feeble echo, the startled yelps of the sentries answered the wild baying of Gray's pack. While some of the guards stood with mouths gaping at the suddenness of this thing which was upon them, two or three others fired unsteadily in Gray's direcrection. One man ran halloing toward the chapel.

Him Gray spotted instantly. The chapel then, was their barracks. If he could command that, his field was won. Seconds now counted lives. If he could bottle those men before they formed to fire a volley, they would be his. By a special dispensation of providence, only a crumbling mound before him marked where the adobe wall had been. As he cleared it in a hurdled stride, he heard himself yelling with the same excitement with which his men howled at his heels.

Sleepy men were stumbling now from the chapel door, some bare-handed, some fumbling with their rifle-bolts. A bare dozen of them had emerged when Gray's seven score surged into the courtyard. Gray wheeled, and for the second time lifted his cap high.

"Hold your fire. Don't shoot. These are your countrymen—and our prisoners!"

His prisoners! God, how the word filled his mouth! That they were his prisoners there was no doubt in anybody's mind. Never had there been such a bloodless victory. The dozen who had reached the open to find themselves ringed round with bayonets were glad enough to drop their weapons. A tragic-faced lieutenant appeared in the doorway. Gray advanced toward him.

"Señor," he said, "you see how it is. Will you consider yourself my prisoner?"

The lieutenant looked in a bewildered way at the encircling bayonets. His face expressed his sick chagrin at the ease with which he had been surprized and at the complete success of the attack. He shrugged.

"Señor, it is the fortune of war. I surrender."

"Very well. I'm sure then that you will be good enough to order your men out five at a time to stack their arms yonder in the *patio*. You will favor me by retaining your own pistol."

The lieutenant smiled and bowed with obvious gratification.

"You are very kind, señor—er—general, is it not?"

"Generalissimo of the revolutionary forces," corrected Gray.

The lieutenant's smile widened, but there was a curious dryness in his tone when he answered.

"Pardon me! I congratulate you, Señor Generalissimo, upon your victory."

WITHIN an hour Gray ruled the hacienda. The peons, almost two hundred in number, he herded together in a drying-shed under a guard. The Government troops he confined in the chapel. The lieutenant, with Don Felipe Moreira and his major-domos, he left in the hacienda under parole. As a last precaution to guard against any excess of enthusiasm on the part of excited patriots, he had stacked in the *patio*, where he had placed his captured arms, all rifles and ammunition except those in the hands of his sentries.

Gray posted the last of his sentries, men of his own training whom he thought he could trust to keep a vigilant watch lest he, too, be surprized. He was returning to the room in the hacienda which he had selected as his office, when Don Felipe stepped from the entrance to the drawing-room and laid a hand quietly on his shoulder.

He was a tall man, this Moreira, with tremendous black eyes. The overwhelming dignity, however, which was lent him by his imperial, was offset by the general kindliness of his expression. His manner was one of perfect ease. He was a polished gentleman, master in his own house, a very *hidalgo* of Spain. In the hand which he laid upon Gray's shoulder there was something almost fatherly.

"Señor Gray, a word with you."

Gray in his newly found dignity felt vague resentment at this familiarity from a prisoner. He raised his eyebrows.

"Certainly. At the moment I am busy. When I am free I shall send my orderly for you."

He stepped clear of the arresting hand and proceeded to his office. At last his mind was free to cope with the perplexing affair of Gomez. He had, though, barely begun to review the extraordinary incident of last night, when a slight altercation at his door caused him to look up.

Don Felipe, calmly purposeful, was pushing aside the helpless orderly and entering the room. Before Gray, in his surprize, could speak, Moreira advanced and seated himself, at the same time indicating a chair for Gray. He smiled.

"Will you not be seated, Señor Gray? My affair with you is more important than any you can have of your own."

Gray was surprized to find himself acquiescing.

"How do you know my name, señor?" he asked bluntly as his first defense to cover his wonderment.

Moreira lifted his shoulders.

"But, señor, that is easy. Your colleague, Mendoza, for a small sum sold me the whole foolish story."

Gray was not in a jesting mood.

"Mendoza— Foolish story, señor? What do you mean?" he snapped.

Moreira passed his indignation with a smile.

"I mean this grandiose plan of the cunning scoundrel Gomez to loot my estate."

"Señor," said Gray stiffly, "this revolution is not to be conducted along the lines recognized in your country. There will be no looting."

Don Felipe laughed outright this time.

"Yes, yes! Mendoza told us about that, too! It was, in fact, the reason he named for his choosing to sell out. He feared that you might make very much trouble, señor, when certain facts became known to you once you had captured for Gomez my estate. But ah, señor, I am amazed that a young man apparently so astute as yourself should have been so easily duped! Yet—I can understand, too. I took pains to find out from Mendoza many things about you."

Anxiety began to gnaw at Gray's haughty confidence. This man seemed to be so self-possessed, so certain of his ground. So it had been Mendoza! God, what was behind this? Gray's tone was far less stern this time.

"What do you mean, señor, by this word 'dupe'?"

"Is it news to you, señor, that this fellow Gomez never had the faintest idea of conducting a revolution? That the single thing he hoped to achieve was to loot my cocoa, all sacked and stored, three hundred thousand *bolivars'* worth of it? Revolution? Pah! How could you believe, señor, that that bandit would ever put his neck in the noose of a revolution?"

Moreira's voice, soft and silky though it was, crashed like a shell in Gray's ears. Was this thing possible? He struggled dazedly to reconsider facts as he knew them, past and present. His revolution a bandit raid? His epaulets, his general's stars the accoutrements of a bandit chief? No! It was only at the beginning that he had thought this thing a farce. The gods could not perpetrate so devilish a jest. Yet—yet there sat Moreira. So calm. So collected. So perfectly sure of himself. Gray tried to weigh hope against reason; but hope weighs very lightly when reason is on the other side of the scale. Reason forced him to consider Gomez. Last night. The man's obvious terror at the mention of Government troops. He understood now. Gomez—ready enough to be a bandit—dared not face the mud wall that was the inevitable fate of a conspirator against the Federal Government.

When Gray spoke again his voice was bitter hard.

"I am afraid, señor, that you convince me. Will you please tell me exactly how this thing happened?"

"Señor Gray, the facts are very simple. A very rich and very foolish dreamer of my country hired Gomez to make him a revolution. Gomez knew the immense impossibility of overthrowing the present government. Moreover, he would never have dared attack a far weaker government. But he conceived a plan. He took the financial backing that was offered him, and proceeded with what was ostensibly the work of a revolutionist. It so happens that the capture of my estate would have made as good a beginning as any to his war. Therefore, his backer was not suspicious when Gomez named his plan of campaign. But all in the world that Gomez ever intended was to come here, loot my cocoa, realize cash upon it, and remove himself to Europe.

"Señor, it was a grandiose, mad plan, but as I have reflected upon it, I have scoffed less and less. I am isolated here. Gomez had worked so very, very quietly. You well know that were I out of the way my poor sheep of peons would follow any one who held my place. He had arranged for the disposition of my cocoa. He had a desperate chance for success.

"When Gomez hired you, señor, he did so at the command of his backer, who refused to proceed further until a commander was secured. Gomez, too, had need of a soldier for, himself, he is not a soldier. He selected you, señor, it is painful to me to say, because he wanted a dupe who would obey him when his intention here was revealed. You had seemed to fill his need.

"And now, pray, tell me how you come to be here. For this Mendoza seemed full of a certainty that Gomez would forsake everything if he were confronted by the least handful of government troops. You surprized us very completely."

In a flat, metallic voice, Gray told. At the end of his brief recital of the last night's events he said heavily:

"It would seem that Gomez who started this mess remains safe and sane. While I, a cat's paw, have fought, for a cause which never existed, with Federal troops. It seems that I am not a soldier, but a comedian whom the gods have set to play in a comedy."

"No, señor," said Don Felipe very gravely, "this, for you, is not a comedy. It is a tragedy."

He rose, and with that last word, left Gray to his thoughts.

* * *

GRAY never knew exactly what those thoughts were. He was in a chaos. The forenoon passed amidst the thunder of his world's dissolution.

The facts in his mind were clear. It was the inner significance—the meaning to his life—of these facts as they had been dealt out to him that crushed him. One reflection which he had never before had occurred to him presently. In the beginning he had met his first downfall in the Army. Then when he had reached what he thought was the bottom of all things, the gods had flung him another chance at soldiering. It was curious that this new road which had seemed the one to his salvation, was the same over which he had traveled to his downfall. Curious and bitter now, the thing seemed—so bitter in its apparent jest that Gray's mind reeled with his rage against the machinations of his fate. For the gods had not meant to accord him the means of salvation. They had meant to wreck him for all time.

So rage and humiliation and despair seared him. And as he sat there amidst the ruins of his world, he missed, as most humans do in their reflections, the true meaning of these events which had come to pass.

For he was not conscious of a final change they were working in him. He was unaware that the last of his youth had this morning left him. That henceforward he could never be otherwise than a mature, whole man. He was unaware that of all the changes in his character, this was the one to which every other had been leading irresistibly.

Presently the chaos in his mind became one insistent aching thought. Again and again the words of it were formed:

"And I had thought myself a general. This morning I thought I had earned the right to wear stars."

He did not know that he had acquired a final, lasting capacity for leadership which until this morning had never been his, and which could not have come to him except with the travail of that day.

It was while Gray sat in his office looking out into nothing, seeing nothing, while he was through suffering attaining to the strength of his final manhood, that Gomez, too wise to make a forced march, and with his mouth filled with ready evasions and excuses to fit whatever circumstances he might find at the hacienda, made a flanking movement through the cocoa fields to reconnoiter the "position which he hoped might yet be turned to his advantage." He found the field of battle a fair orchard laden with luscious plums ripe for his picking.

The soldiers were in the chapel, under guard and behind closed doors—good solid doors built of hard wood bought with the doles of the penitent and put together with the labor of pious hands; doors studded with great brass nails and secured by a huge wrought-iron lock. The soldiers were safe enough. The peons—not that they mattered much—were herded in a drying-shed with bayonets to keep them in order. The brains of the estate, the gentlemen, were in the house under parole not to leave it. Everything everywhere was in the hands of his own men, every single one of whom he had himself recruited. His own dear hand-picked patriots!

Gomez sat back on his haunches, smoothed his whiskers and purred. It seemed to him that he was about to eat the canary. There would be no difficulty for him, with his crafty tongue, to explain to the soldiers his absence from the fight, to discredit Gray, to explain to these gullible children that it was necessary to loot this cocoa which lay so providentially ready to hand, in order to replenish the exchequer of the fabled revolution.

Only one obstacle stood in his way: The government soldiers. They would, by all means, have to be eliminated. Yet, well—He shrugged almost up to his ears. He had no scruples about anything or anybody. It ought not, therefore, to be difficult to eliminate fifty soldiers locked up in a strong building; and to do it without bringing upon himself any suspicion of having lifted his hand against the Federal Government. Without doubt he could harangue the dear patriots themselves into undertaking the elimination. Furthermore Señor Gray had most certainly made himself the perfect foil. Whatever happened in this place would definitely be blamed upon *el Señor Generalissimo* who so competently commanded the Revolution.

Gomez spent a busy morning.

The first intimation that Gray had of his sinister activity was a scuffling sound in the hallway which ended abruptly in a hoarse shout. So deep was his lethargy of despair, however, that it was many seconds before the need for action brought him to himself. It was then that he smelled smoke.

He rose from his chair and called his orderly. There was no response. He strode to the door, opened it and looked out. Instead of his orderly, another man, machete-armed, crouched behind the half open door, his eyes fixed avidly upon Gray's suddenly presented back. But him Gray did not see. His eyes were compelled to a startling scene at the far end of the hallway.

Five men of the Arita recruits with fixed bayonets held the drawing-room entrance against the helpless group of his paroled prisoners, at the head of whom stood Moreira white and calm and terrible of aspect. Gray rubbed both eyes with his knuckles as though to stir them to clear seeing after heavy sleep. The group before him did not change. There it stood, fixed, tense, surcharged with a spirit of slaughtering energy that would be unleashed at the littlest move from either side.

Gray's right hand groped toward his pistol, closed upon its butt, and flashed the barrel clear of its holster. The last trace of his stupor was leaving him now, and down through his arms to his fingers, up through his neck to his cheeks, flushed a stinging, vital flood of warmth.

Then he turned. Perhaps he had heard the sound of a low breath behind him, perhaps a single cautious footstep. As he swung he found himself face to face with the knife-armed skulker at his door. A wild look blazed in the man's countenance—fear and madness mixed. And in the air above this visage the long knife quivered. From a distance of scarcely two feet that same knife descended in a sweeping stroke toward Gray's chest. Gray had a split second's impression of the bright steel that had become galvanized into a downward flashing death.

His instinctive action was to snatch his body back and to drop to his hands. It was the old trick of a boyhood game. His movement had been quick and limber. His next was even more so. Through eyes turned obliquely upward, he saw the knife raised again, and clutched this time like a scimitar in two fierce hands. He saw two legs before him spread wide apart that force might be lent the hacking, downward blow. He plunged forward on hands and knees, head ducked. His shoulders shot between those outspread legs and he heaved himself upward. The result was as it had been always in his play. The assassin toppled over on his face, and a metallic crash told Gray that the machete had flown from his hand.

Gray found himself entangled in arms and legs. He breathed deep, and with a sudden effort threw himself on top of his opponent. He had clung to his pistol. He jammed the muzzle against the man's ear.

"Quick!" Gray hissed. "I'll give you ten seconds to speak."

After a moment of heavy breathing the soldier spoke, whining:

"*Altissimo*, don't shoot! I was but obeying the order of Señor Gomez to find you out and strike you with my machete. I—I—"

Gray leaned forward until his face hung tense above those terrorized eyes. His throat contracted as though wrenched by a great hand; his voice came husky, scarcely louder than a whisper.

"Is Gomez here?"

"*Sí señor*. Yes! Yes! He—"

"What is he doing?"

"*Altissimo, el Señor Gomez* loots and burns. The men obey his orders under promise of great riches."

"——!" Gray's shout was coincident with his leap from the prostrate man.

If Gomez were here mischief was surely afoot. He understood the scene in the passage now. Assassins, all of them!

None of the group there in the doorway had stirred. Throughout his short struggle they had stood fixed, both sides tensed for death blows, yet neither daring quite to strike the first. Gray raised his pistol and charged down the passage.

"Drop your guns!" he yelled.

The men looked toward him with hesitant faces. Gray fired a shot just short of their feet, which ripped into the polished floor boards and drove white splinters into the air. The hall still roared with the explosion when he hurled himself amongst them. He slugged the first man before him in the face with the heel of his pistol. The fellow's rifle dropped with a clatter to the floor.

"Señores, take these rifles!" Gray shouted, and followed his command by wresting the rifle from the next nearest man.

Don Felipe was no man who needed telling twice. He leaped upon the man nearest him, and his major-domos were quick to follow. In a few seconds the would-be assassins were cringing against the wall.

"Señor Moreira!—" Gray's order was incisive—"take these men and lock them up. Señor Lieutenant! We must release your men and arm them. To the chapel, quick! Take charge of the major-domos and follow me!"

Gray rushed to the outer doorway. But there he was halted by a scene that made his eye-balls start in their sockets.

The smoke that he had smelled came from the chapel. From the rear windows it welled in greasy, acrid fumes of burning adobe wattle. From the little square tower where hung the old Spanish bell, it swirled black, as from the stack of an incinerator.

And nobody needed to be told what a hideous incinerator the chapel gave promise of becoming. The great door which faced them across the courtyard resounded with the muffled thunder of helpless fists. Choking yells and shrieks upon the name of the Holy Virgin rose above the uproar.

"God of Heaven!" yelled Gray, "The key! Who's got the key?"

His own guards whom he had left outside the chapel door were nowhere to be seen. Instead, the courtyard was filled with a mob of milling men, most of them unarmed—for which he thanked God. But a few held rifles—the weapons of his vanished guard. Gray recognized the new riflemen as being the most particularly troublesome of all his men, hard-bitten malcontents, Gomez's choicest hand-picked beauties. These were obviously in control of the situation. The others milled around like sheep, half frightened, half fascinated by the holocaust.

Suddenly from the chapel a stentorian shout made itself heard.

"Room there, while I let in some air!"

Followed a tinkling crash, and one of the high stained-glass windows fell out bodily. With it came a gaudily painted statue of the Holy Mother which struck and was smashed to powder against the cobbles of the court. In the tense horror of the situation the sacrilege passed unheeded. The space where the window had been was immediately filled with the head and shoulders of a fear-crazed soldier who must have stood upon the backs of comrades struggling to gain the same outlet. One of the rifle-armed ruffians from the crowd fired, and the head disappeared with a shriek which only augmented the shrieks and imprecations from behind the door. To the left another window crashed out, the prelude to another shot and shriek.

Gray's sense of helplessness was horrible. Twice he raised his pistol to fire at one of the murderers, and yet dared not. A head and shoulders in a weaving crowd was no mark to aim at. He turned to find Don Felipe plucking at his elbow.

"The only way to break down the door would be with dynamite. I have explosive —if we could but apply it."

"Get it!" Gray snapped.

MOREIRA vanished. And now the very attempts of the wretched prisoners to obtain air for themselves piled up the horror of their plight. The fire at the rear of the chapel, encouraged by the fresh draft from the shattered windows, blazed fiercely around the altar, and a long tongue licked up through the roof. The crowd of sheep outside acclaimed it with a shout that was more like a groan.

Moreira was back at Gray's elbow. Gray wheeled with one hand outstretched for the little red stick. With the other he snatched his knife from his pocket. While his eye gauged the shortest possible length of fuse for his purpose, he tore open the knife-blade with his teeth. To bite the percussion cap on to the fuse, jam it into an incision in the stick, was but the work of a second; and then he was ready.

"*Brava*, señor!" cried Moreira. "But in God's name, how do you propose to plant it? How get through the crowd?"

"Watch me," Gray answered grimly. "They'll move!"

He struck a match on his boot and held it to the fuse. It was a heavy chance that he took, but he had judged his men well. Holding the deadly red stick with its sputtering fuse well above his head, he dashed into the crowd.

"Way there!" he screamed. "*Dynamita!*"

Not a man there but knew the potential deadliness of that little red stick.

"*Dynamita!*" Gray's shout was taken up as they hurled themselves madly from his path.

"*Dynamita!*" yelled Gray again, now through the keyhole of the ponderous lock.

And he dared risk another interval while he hammered at the door to make himself heard above the clamor within.

"Stand back within! I dynamite the door!"

A pandemonium told him that while the imprisoned men shrank from the fire at the end of the chapel, they shrank more from the dynamite. It was enough. Gray dared wait no longer. With his foot he thrust his petard into the hollow between the door and the worn stone steps; and dashed for the shelter of the house.

He was half way across the court when a tremendous concussion paralyzed his limbs. As he fell he was vaguely conscious of a report. He felt his senses slipping, and in his head a measured pounding as of a hammer. After what seemed an hour he realized that the pounding was no more than his own heart beats. With that came a more disquieting realization. The report had not been the dynamite! He knew now that it was a rifle shot. His skull had been grazed. After the first shock his senses were rapidly returning to him. But it was still an appalling, leaden effort to turn his head. Somehow he managed it. His eyes centered upon the chapel door. And there, in spite of the hour that had passed, he saw the fuse still sputtering merrily.

If it gave him another hour, perhaps he could roll away. He did not know for how many hours or how many miles he had rolled before a blast of hot air flattened him to the ground, and a dull boom reverberated throughout the court. After another hour he got to his feet, and, with splintered bits of wood raining on him, lurched to the hacienda door.

Men were cowering in corners, behind each other, under whatever shelter they could find. As he reached the door and clutched at the post to hold himself, he saw a pall of smoke issue from the ragged edges of what had been the chapel front. In another moment, like shrapnel belching from a cannon's mouth, the embrasure belched forth men, wild-eyed, savage, and cursing. After that, one thought alone remained in Gray's mind.

Gomez!

Gomez was at the bottom of all this horror. Gomez was a wild beast which had to be stopped.

Gray was aware that Moreira and the lieutenant stood, one on each side of him, supporting him. They were looking to him obviously for instructions. Even in his dazed condition he recognized the significance of their dependence upon him. He struggled valiantly to make his brain respond.

"Señor Lieutenant, your rifles are in the *patio*. Señor Moreira, release your peons fromthe drying shed and get them in hand."

As they hurried off, he was infinitely thankful for a moment in which he might steady himself.

He was shaken as much by the rage within him as by the bullet graze along his scalp. From his eminence on the step his eyes flashed from one swarming figure to another, looking, searching, questing like an angry eagle's for the one man that counted now. But his eyes blurred as blood from his wound slid down his forehead. With an impatient gesture he snatched his handkerchief and bound it about his forehead as a tennis player binds a sweat-band. There was blood enough in his eye from his own red anger.

Nowhere amongst the faces below did he find the one he sought. The lieutenant in the court before him was hustling his men, now with rifles in their hands, into formation. Gray's own men—or rather the men who had been his—stood about in groups, shrinking back against the walls to make space for the swift maneuver that was taking place in the center of the court.

"With ball cartridges, load!" blared the lieutenant's voice. "Ready! Now then, arrest these men!"

But this was not to Gray's intention. He flung up his hand to gain attention.

"Hold!" he shouted. "That is not important. Señor Lieutenant, divide your men into squads and scour the outhouses, the sheds, the barns. Leave nothing until you arrest Gomez! We must find Gomez. Nothing else matters."

But in that moment Gomez himself made known his whereabouts. A monstrous thing happened.

Heralded alone by its own scream a one-pound, high-explosive shell ripped in and crashed against a corner of the hacienda. The ground shook. The air went red, then black with a stinking smoke. Over all swept a hail of adobe chunks and fragments of rended steel. A second afterward, men reeled back from the point of explosion, shrieking. And close to the gap in the hacienda wall, two—or it might have been three—misguided patriots lay smeared over the stone court.

Gray had seen many of those terrific little shells go out from his lines. He had seen many more returned. But at that instant his nerves crawled. In dazed unbelief he stared at the damage to the house, and then at the dead—the dead so torn to crimson pulp that they seemed not human shapes, but gobbets of butcher's meat.

"O ——," he half sobbed, "the Hotchkiss! *That devil!*"

He hurled himself down the steps and amongst the men.

"Gomez! Get him!" he cried, as though these soldiers would know what he meant.

Without hesitation then, without waiting to see whether any or all followed, he raced out of the court to the open plain where he had ordered Sanchez to station the awful gun.

A forlorn charge his was against the gun. Perhaps so did the Light Brigade feel when, wounded and dazed, they charged the cannon mouth.

Fifty strides carried him beyond the adobe wall to open ground across which, three hundred yards away, he saw the level rifle tube. Upon the ground behind the breech knelt one man, Sanchez. Above him stood another who held a pistol hard against the gunner's neck.

Gomez!

From the hoarse human sounds behind him, Gray knew that he ran alone, that somehow those shrinking herds neither followed nor sought cover, but just stood to watch his race. Now he raised his pistol, but held his fire. He saw the gunner make a swift movement and knew that he had closed the breech. Before him a blade of yellow flame stabbed out. A thin smoke-ring was hurled into the still air. Coincident with the *whang* of the gun before him he heard behind the sonorous clang of a bell and the rumble of falling débris. Without looking back he knew that the square old tower of the chapel was dust.

Still he ran with his head bowed to the effort. Again the gun flashed. He felt the windage of a low-flying shell that demolished a whole section of the adobe wall. Hideously close that had been. Gray knew how accurate that little gun might be under a cool and keen-eyed gunner's hands. He was sick and silent within himself, but still he ran.

Indistinctly he made out Gomez's features and the wild fear in the gunner's face. He opened fire. He shot periodically, not hoping to hit but knowing the moral effect of his shots. For a last second he saw Gomez holding his ground, saw Sanchez fumbling a shell into the breech.

Gray fired again. Sanchez, instead of reaching to the lanyard, screeched and threw his arms over his face, spattered by Gray's bullet that had hit the gun.

Gomez reared back then. He cursed Sanchez once, kicked him savagely, and fled. Sanchez, unhurt, ran in a direction opposite.

Then Gray was on his knees behind the gun. Beyond him, straight for the shelter of the sandstone bunker from which Gray had reconnoitered that morning, raced his madman. Already he was beyond pistol range. And he was a wild beast that must be stopped.

Gray heaved himself to his feet. With the effort of two men he lifted the gun trail and with it staggered through a half circle. He forgot his head, his burning, dry mouth. He knelt again in the old position that he had known well, thankful for the ready shell in the breech. His shoulder fitted itself against the rest. His eyes dropped level with the sights. With swift precision he laid the gun on his mark. He drew a long breath to steady himself, and twitched the lanyard.

Nearly half a mile away he saw the splash of the shell against the sandstone hummock. From the distance behind him he heard a confused roar. It was the shouting of the men who lined the adobe wall like baseball fans and cheered his shooting. He was amazingly cool now.

"High and to the left," he muttered, and clapped another shell into the breech.

Once again the missile sped, and a white scar blazed out on the hummock. The cheer from behind was frenzied.

"Better," he muttered again, "but I'll bet my life that front sight's cock-eyed."

Gomez, dwindling in the distance, seemed to become aware that the bunker offered a sighting mark. He suddenly altered his course to run clear of the hoped-for protection which had become a menace.

Gray swore softly into the breech of his gun. This was going to be more difficult. Yet he felt elated with a calm confidence. Once again he fired. But the far cloud of dust that arose on the open plain offered no indication of how close to its fleeing mark the shell had passed. A murmur like a groan came from the watchers on the wall.

He worked with cold haste. With every second his target dwindled. He muttered to himself as was his habit.

"I'll get just about six more shots before I can't see him at all. But it's all right. His name is on one of the six!"

It was on the very next, etched in Fate's lurid letters of red. Gray loaded. With the grim eyes of Nemesis he sighted, and his hand was very steady as he fired.

The air far out across the field blazed, became smoke-shot, and for an instant longer seemed to be stained with a thin red mist. The place where Gomez had been was empty.

Gray rose stiffly, his hand against the gun. With narrowed, penetrating eyes he stood gazing out across the bare plain, out and out, until the smart of the blistering hot rifle tube against his flesh aroused him at last.

They were still cheering deliriously, Moreira's peons and the government platoon, as Gray approached the hacienda. But the faces of Don Felipe and the lieutenant were as grave as Gray's own. He faced them with a curious small gesture of his hands.

"Señores," he said soberly, "it is finished. I have played out my part in this tragic comedy. I have but one thing to ask: Those others—my misguided men—who played with me, they were but supers. I beg that you will not trouble them, but will let them go."

Moreira smiled.

"*Amigo*, already they have taken that precaution for themselves. They have gone."

"Well, then," said Gray, "I have only to make my apologies, and to execute as graceful an exit as possible. I return at once, *amigo* Moreira, to the house of my father, where I belong."

With that, however, the lieutenant's face became still more grave. He eyed Gray, the toe of his boot, and again Gray. His mouth straightened, and he spoke with hesitant determination:

"Your pardon, *Altissimo*, I regret, but this is not possible. My situation becomes unpleasant and most difficult. Señor Moreira must understand, and you, too, will understand, I pray. I can not do otherwise. I regret, but I must place *el señor Generalissimo* under Federal arrest."

Gray looked at him amazedly, blankly, and after a time, tragically. For a moment he was beaten. Arrest. So the gods *had* meant, after all, to jest. Then he saw that they had not.

He stiffened. He had been through many things since the inception of this game he had played with his gods. The Gray who faced the lieutenant now was a man who understood men, a man who knew himself for a commander of men. He barked a short laugh. To the lieutenant he said:

"Very well, señor. I am willing to put this matter to the test. Go ahead. Tell your men to arrest me. Will they obey you? Or will they obey me, whom—," a grim satisfaction rang in his voice—"whom you yourself have called Generalissimo?"

The lieutenant faced him in blank indecision. He looked toward his men, and then he looked back at Gray, tall, hard, forceful. He made no move. He gave no command.

Don Felipe laughed and laid a fatherly hand upon the shoulder of each of them.

"Señor Lieutenant," he said, "my advice to you is not to make the test."

The Camp-Fire

A free-to-all meeting place for readers, writers and adventurers

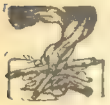
Our Camp-Fire came into being May 5, 1912, with our June issue, and since then its fire has never died down. Many have gathered about it and they are of all classes and degrees, high and low, rich and poor, adventurers and stay-at-homes, and from all parts of the earth. Some whose voices we used to know have taken the Long Trail and are heard no more, but they are still memories among us, and new voices are heard, and welcomed.

We are drawn together by a common liking for the strong, clean things of out-of-doors, for word from the earth's far places, for man in action instead of caged by circumstance. The *spirit* of adventure lives in all men; the rest is chance.

But something besides a common interest holds us together. Somehow a real comradeship has grown up among us. Men can not thus meet and talk together without growing into friendlier relations; many a time does one of us come to the rest for facts and guidance; many a close personal friendship has our Camp-Fire built up between two men who had never met; often has it proved an open sesame between strangers in a far land.

Perhaps our Camp-Fire is even a little more. Perhaps it is a bit of leaven working gently among those of different station toward the fuller and more human understanding and sympathy that will some day bring to man the real democracy and brotherhood he seeks. Few indeed are the agencies that bring together on a friendly footing so many and such great extremes as here. And we are numbered by the hundred thousand now.

If you are come to our Camp-Fire for the first time and find you like the things we like, join us and find yourself very welcome. There is no obligation except ordinary manliness, no forms or ceremonies, no dues, no officers, no anything except men and women gathered for interest and friendliness. Your desire to join makes you a member.



ONCE more the question of just how to hit another gentleman over the head with a gun. This time it's Uncle Frank Huston who's giving us instruction in the gentle art.

San Diego, California.

Just a word *in re* this batting a man with the butt of a gun. I have seen a few men so walloped, but never saw a gun reversed and held by the barrel nor have I ever seen one sniped with the barrel itself. By gun I mean a *gun* not a shotgun or a rifle. Guns for use were made without swivels on the butt, wooden handles or plates, the shape about as now. The base of the butt is what strikes his bean and if the gun jars off the bullet goes away from "you'n'-him too."

A few were found in the rounded butt shape but these were not popular. Grip with three fingers and index in guard, thumb-tip on left of cylinder, the heel of the hand is level with or slightly above heel of butt. Pull your hand and arm back like throwing a rock or to first base and strike forward sideways or down. If you are excited and don't hit square like driving a nail with a hammer you'll cut with the edge and make a messy sticky job of it; he'll lose some skin anyway in all probability.

But to reverse it and use it like a hammer holding the barrel, muzzle toward you and the damned thing loaded, to say nothing of having to be a juggler to do it—well you deserve what you get, if you do.

Then, as "Ole Man Wig" will tell you, the weight is at the stern end, no heft in the "bar'l." Of course, if you have been foolish or childish enough not to have removed the front sight you can cut a nice gash with it, but, as they say in Arkansaw, "That's too gashly business for a white man."

ALSO when the cap and ball revolver was in use, cartridge-belts were *not*. No cartridge belts until late '70's. Remember that, you East Boston Western authors and New York "Grenitch" paint daubers. *And* no brass studded belt or wrist guards until the movies invented.

—— was laid out stiff "down to the Bay" once by being walloped with a pistol butt, as I have described. It was a *pistol*, not a revolver, and rounded butt at that.

On the morning of July 4, 1914, a German Reservist was laid out stiff by a similar blow right here in San Diego just for calling the American flag "a ol' striped methas" (he meant mattress). On this occasion it was a .45 swivel and toggle at butt and he got cut a bit. E. E. Harriman of "A. A." now has that gun. Ask him.

The idea is to utilize it as a sort of "brass knuckles" or the doodad the old Roman gladiators used. In the old navy sometimes the hilt of a cutlass was utilized in the same manner and even swords and claymores have been so used.—Uncle Frank.

* * *

A LETTER written over eighty years ago by an American in Mexico was brought to my attention by Arthur D. Howden Smith while he was at work on his novel featuring William Walker and his Nicaraguan exploits. You will remember that Mr. Smith appealed to Camp-Fire for authoritative data on Walker and his times. Among those who responded was Roswell Parish, Jr., of Duxbury, Mass., who sent this letter and others to Mr. Smith. Through the courtesy of Mr. Parish and of Mrs. Frances B. Seaver of Vero, Florida, the owner of the letter, it is passed on to all of us at Camp-Fire—a very interesting view of the United States and Mexico in 1842. Its writer died a few months after the letter was written. A comment upon the case is worth passing along: "It does not seem much like a modern young man of twenty-three years."

Matamoras, Mexico, April 19, 1842.

My Very Dear Mother: Since I left my dear and cherished home, a long time has elapsed, which has brought with it many and important changes in my personal condition. And it was this increasing change that prevented me from writing you long ere this. But I now hasten to make amends for my past negligence by giving you a brief sketch of my adventures and operations since I last saw you. I arrived in New York on December 3rd which I left on January 18th for Savannah via Philadelphia, Washington and Charleston where I arrived on January 25th. Philadelphia, the City of Banks, financiers and financial operations, is the most beautiful city in the Union. The regularity of its streets, all running at right angles, their neatness, the good order that prevails, all strike the attention of the traveller, as no other town in the United States. I visited the old Federal Hall where Franklin and his compeers signed that immortal document—the declaration of our independence; where Washington and his compeers sat in convention and completed the Federation of the States.

Baltimore is conspicuous for a beautiful monument to the memory of the Father of his Country erected by the affections of his countrymen; and for its being the greatest Flour mart in the World.

WASHINGTON! Who shall describe Washington? with its Capitol, its broad avenues, its White House, about which there has been and will be, so much contention, so long as our Government retains its present form, its legislators, and public grounds? I answer, a more graphic pen than mine. I remained there twenty-four hours, altogether too short a time for one to see one half of the Lions of the town. At 11 o'clock I paid my court to our President who received me very politely where I remained about five minutes. I then strolled out into the grounds in front and walked into the celebrated East Room, which was furnished with all the richness of Oriental magnificence; from there I promenaded up Pennsylvania avenue to the Capitol and entered the gallery of the Senate Chamber, where our most "potent, grave" and *patriotic Senators* are wont to consult, not the interests of the Nation—but the interests of their own precious selves. I was fortunate enough to hear a number of our first men speak, among whom were the easy, lucid, handsome, good natured and slightly cockeyed Buchanan, the slovenly and scowling Woodbury, the noble looking, energetick and pungent Calhoun, with Rives, Reston, King, Evans, and others. I also saw Mr. Benton, Mr. Wright and Mr. Clay who is the homliest man in the Nation, in my opinion.

I REMAINED in Richmond about 21 hours where there is nothing of note but the capitol and house of Delegates which were in Session, and Senate. I visited the Capitol where I heard the best speakers which the Old Dominion can turn out. I proceeded on through Petersburg and Wilmington to Charleston and Savannah, where I remained two days and then embarked in the brig *Savannah* for New York. I had suffered from the apprehension of being sea sick but after being out 1 day, the sea pretty smooth, I lost all fear, and very crankily remarked to the Captain that I was waterproof; "A ha!" said he, "we'll see; wait till we have a little rougher weather"; "no fear" said I. Next morning about 11 o'clock I felt a kind of unearthly feeling at my stomach. I ran into the cabin and sat down, and from there I ran aft, retching most violently; at that moment the Captain came along on the upper deck and peered over and sung out, "Hello you waterproof man you had better go to leeward," after that I had the regular rig onto me by all the passengers. I laid sick as death about 72 hours without food of any kind, in fact I loathed everything in the shape of food and every meal the mate would say "come, Mr. Water Proof get up here and eat half a beef's tongue, a couple of fowls and a big slice of raw pork and molasses."

I ARRIVED in New York on Feby 3rd and immediately proceeded to Albany via New Haven, Hartford and Springfield where I hired a horse and went down to Cabotville to see Mary Ann and Amanda and you can imagine my disappointment when I learned that they had not arrived in town. From Albany I went down to New York and after making various arrangements I left on the 15th of Feby for this place via Pittsburg, the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. We had a splendid run down the Ohio and the great Father of Waters to Columbia, Ark. where I landed about 2 o'clock P.M. I immediately procured a horse and started for Old River to pay Sister Maria a visit; after a beautiful ride of ten miles, seven of which were on the bank of this pretty lake, in company with a Mr. Davis; crossed over about dusk just as a thunder storm was breaking with the most magnificent thunder and lightning I ever saw, and then I had two miles to ride in perfect darkness with no other light than the electric light of heaven, with the rain pouring in torrents. However, Mr. Davis was so kind as to loan me his umbrella which partly sheltered me. I wished to try his (Mr. Rose) hospitality and when I rode up to the house, I cried out, "Hallo the house!" "Hallo" a voice cried from a half-opened door. "Can I have lodgings here tonight?" said I. "Who are you?" cried the voice. "A traveller," I cried. "Yes, I reckon so. Nat take care of this horse, walk in sir," said Mr. Rose for it was he. I walked in with my hat drawn down over my eyes, looking intently at the fire, without looking up at all, but it was no go. I hadn't got more than 3 feet inside the door before Maria rushed into my arms exclaiming "my dear brother! my dear brother! Where did you come from? What brought you here?" After mutual gratulations had passed I sat down and discussed the merits of a good supper.

This was on the 1st of March, I consequently had the pleasure of passing my 23rd birthday anniversary with her. If superstitition now held her sway as she did five hundred years ago and I was one of the mighty potentates of the Earth, I should believe that even the elements conspired to give me a cordial reception there, for the second night after my arrival, the wind rose and blew very hard from the North taking the roof and gable ends off of one house on the plantation, when it instantly chopped round to the South, blowing a perfect hurricane, reducing two houses to a perfect mass of ruins and unroofing two more and the one in which we were, shivering in the wind like a genuine subject of fever and ague, and heavy timber falling all about us in every direction. When the wind blew from the North I was very much alarmed lest we should be swept house and all off into the Lake and when it chopped round to the South, I was just as fearful of the falling timber as I knew that some stood near the house.

Mr. Byron, a Methodist preacher was my bedfellow that night who in common with me was driven out of our bed, by the rain pouring through the roof where the shingles had been torn up by the wind. Now I do not like to confess myself a coward, neither do I mean to, but let me tell you that the idea of being transfixed by a sharp stick in the shape of a huge limb coming down through the roof or being thrust into the Lake which burneth not with fire and brimstone, but with rage and fury under the influence of a southern tornado, was not altogether calculated to render one comfortable, either in body or mind. And instead of hearing some humble petition put up to heaven by the man of God who was sojourning with us, as we had a right to expect, he was as quiet as a mute, and in five minutes after it was over he was laughing and talking about it with the utmost *Sang froid;* while Maria, as Mr. Rose quaintly expressed it was praying as fast as a horse could run.

I remained four days with them. Mr. Rose has 850 acres of land valued at 25 Thousand dollars now, but it has been worth 50 dollars an acre, 17 negroes and negresses in all, 60 head of cattle, 200 Hogs large and small, valued at about 5 thousand dollars, he is worth I should think 30 thousand dollars and what is better than all he is a fine man; and out of debt. Maria has bettered her condition much and is placed above all want. They are going to build a brick house this summer, so you may not be disappointed if you do not see them till next summer. From Mr. Rose's I proceeded down to New Orleans where I arrived on the 9th of March and was detained 24 days there before there was a vessel to sail for this place.

I ARRIVED here on April 10th. I am now with an old established house here doing the principal business. The principal partner of this concern is the Father of the young man now gone out to Brazil with Lucius in co-partnership. They sailed Jan'y 14th and will return about the 1st of June. About Matamoras I can say but little as I have not been here long, except, we have very warm weather and have had no rain of any consequence for six months. The people here all speak Spanish, gabbling like ducks and geese, which is just about as intelligible to me as was the Delphian Oracle of old to the ancients. This port is blockaded by the Texians and you need not think strange if this is the last letter you will get from me in some time. You needn't fear for my health for this is one of the healthiest places in the World. I want you to make yourself acquainted with the result of my trial next fall and if it goes in my favor to occupy the premises immediately. I have given all requisite information to Mr. Peck so you need not take any trouble. I want you to write immediately and direct to me Matamoras, Mexico, care of Mess. I. W. Zacharie & Co. New Orleans.

Write all that you think would interest me, that church affair of yours, and how your health is and Grandfather's. Give my love to him and to Elizabeth. Give my best respects to all those who remember me. And now dear Mother accept of my renewed assurances of affection and regard with my best wishes for your happiness and comfort.

Your ever Affectionate Son
M. S. SMITH.

* * *

SOMETHING from J. Allan Dunn in connection with his serial, beginning in this issue. Scotch and Irish, how about the pipes coming to your people from Britain? And he that said it with Irish blood in him!

Pawling, New York.

The history of the bagpipe is, of course, an interesting one with the original sources far back in the ancient history of Rome, of Greece, Persia and Egypt. It is most probable that the Romans were the first to introduce it into Britain where it is known they had schools for training pipers. From Britain it was introduced into Caledonia and Ireland simply enough. Of course there are variants in type of instrument, formerly and now, but the principle is the same. The bagpipe is a link between the syrinx and the primitive organ. In the Highland bagpipe, though Gordon MacCreagh may rise fiercely to contradict me, the notes do not form any known diatonic scale, as they are not strictly in tune with each other, aside from the C and F being very distinctly too sharp.

While they use musical notation for the pipe tunes in late years, the olden pipers used verbal equivalents, such as the

Hodroho, hodroho, haninin, hiechin

mentioned.

AS FOR the plausibility of an adventurer toting his pipes with him, I have only to refer to my very good friend—he *was* at any rate—Gordon MacCreagh of the writers' brigade. Gordon is a *verra bonny piper* and he carries the *piobroch* with him wherever he goes. Personally I am convinced that the sound of his pipes has done much to get him out of situations of considerable danger, especially when he took the "courage medicine" on the Mulford Expedition. Mac would say he charmed the savages. I say he scared 'em. It's all the point of view, or the state of ear.

I've had Mac playing to me in his rooms where the walls are hung with weird weapons, with musical instruments, with skins and horns and wizards' paraphernalia. The figure of McCreagh, blawin' an' fingerin' his grace notes as he marched up and down, would grow misty and the magic from his pipe would make my skin crawl and my hair lift as the drones rent my soul asunder and the chaunter shrilled its eerie melody. Piobroch music—if it be music—has a knack of sending the spirit flying back along the corridors of Time and bringing up ancient memories of primitive environment. It has some of the same effect as Indian drums, South Sea drums, barbaric tom-toms and panpipes. It unleashes the subconscious.

I wish you could all hear MacCreagh and see him —for a piper is a proud figure of a man. It needs the chest of a gorilla to attempt "Cock o' the North," and some of the Laments—well named they are—make the mechanical achievements of Ringling Bros., loudest calliope but the wail of an infant to the trumpet of a *musth* bull elephant.

There is every probability of galleons being wrecked on those dangerous Solomon Island reefs. They weren't charted those days and even now it is no easy job to keep tabs on growing coral.

There is native gold in the Solomons and in New Guinea. Oodles of it, and yet the natives do not work it up for ornaments, any more than the western North American Indians did, though they knew of its existence. And that is rather a curious thing when we reflect how other tribes used the malleable, effective metal in their arts.

Those hardwoods of Fiji are really marvellous for beauty, durability and adaptability to the uses of cabinet-makers and engravers.—J. Allan Dunn.

IN CORRESPONDENCE concerning this story some of us raised the point of colors not being distinguishable by moonlight, and here is Mr. Dunn's reply. Also he scoffs at the idea that sharks don't eat men.

Pawling, New York.

Now, as to moonlight, your principle is wrong so far as tropic and even semi-tropic latitudes are concerned. The first thing that strikes the visitor to say Honolulu, is that, under moonlight, color is distinguishable to a marked degree. Objects seemed tinted perhaps but the degrees vary. The scarlet hibiscus will remain almost black but the pinker blooms will be well hued, so will the yellow plumaria petals, the purple of the bougainvillea, the orange of the native huapala trumpet-vine. The cocopalms and bananas are almost vividly green, the gradations of sea and lagoon blues and greens are visible. A gold coin is readily distinguishable from a silver one. The colors of most gowns.

I know you will take my word for this but I should like you to look into it more thoroughly and convince yourself. It struck me as a phenomenon that was very interesting and I often studied it. So have others whom you will ask. And there's a whale of a difference in the quality of moonrays north and south and along the Line. Color is toned down but not denied by Lady Luna, save that she is not strong enough to bring out the heavy reds. Glad this came up.

MacCreagh told me some one wrote to "Camp-Fire" and denied flatly that sharks ate men. This may furnish interesting dope for the discussion, but it's an amazing statement.—J. Allan Dunn.

* * *

AS THE old-timers will remember, this isn't W. A. Macdonald's first story in our magazine, but the proverbial shyness of the newspaper man hitherto kept him from following Camp-Fire custom and introducing himself.

"Time" is not my first in *Adventure*, but this is the first time I have stood up. I have been in newspaper work something like seventeen years and a member of the staff of the Boston *Evening Transcript*, of which I am assistant news editor, since early 1911. Some years ago *Adventure* printed five stories of mine about a character named *Taylor*, but mostly everything I have written has been for newspapers.

I HAVE specialized in politics enough to have been sent to one national convention and to have seen a smattering of Washington; have written a few editorials, some book reviews, a good deal of dramatic criticism, a few score of special articles and considerable news including an interview with Admiral Sims a couple of years ago that somewhat startled the Navy Department, and an inquiry into Clark University that is still echoing here and there about the country after more than a year. However, it has been just the run of newspaper work except for two points: one, that I had the luck to be the only reporter that went to sea with the escort that accompanied the old cruiser *Olympia* to Washington when the body of the Unknown Soldier came back from France; two, that so far as I know—and I'm more than willing to be corrected—I have covered more sledge-dog races than any other newspaper man in the United States, having begun with the first Eastern International.

It has been my good luck to strike acquaintance with a good many men of the Navy and of the Coast Guard about the latter of which services there is something in "Time." Captain Preston Uberroth has told me some of the adventures of the old cutter *Bear* and I have had more of the same from Captain John Bryan; Captain W. V. E. Jacobs has more than once offered me his fine hospitality and I have had the pleasure of seeing a Yale-Harvard boat race from under the wing of Captain

Camden. A lot of other fine fellows, and good officers—Wheeler, Pine, Alger, Perkins, Spencer, Starr, McLane and others, not to mention Dr. Duke, have helped make life more interesting, on deck and ashore. That is about all I know, except that as I write this I am getting ready to go to Tennessee to report the trial of young Mr. Scopes who is charged with teaching evolution in the schools.—W. A. MACDONALD.

* * *

ON THE occasion of his first story in our magazine, David R. Sparks follows Camp-Fire custom and rises to introduce himself. It's no comfort to me that my own desk isn't a polished one.

New York City.

I find myself pretty thankful to be sitting before Camp-Fire—or standing if it is my turn to stand.

I WAS born in Illinois, at Alton, November 3, 1897. The winter months of nearly all of my childhood years I spent with my father and mother on Jupiter Island, which lies just north of Palm Beach. When I was sixteen it was thought that I had run wild in the Florida sunlight long enough, and I was clapped into a military academy, from which I graduated two years later, in 1916. In early 1917 I served for a spell in the Norton-Harjes Ambulance Corps, then finished the War in the American Field Artillery. I returned to college after the Armistice and graduated from Harvard University in 1920.

Since those long-ago glamorous winters on Jupiter Island I expect I've never been quite sane. I had got too much of the sea and the sun in my brain. At any rate, after college, I decided that I wanted to write stories, but the main point was that I did *not* want to get foul of an office. I've had some narrow escapes from the polished desk, but at last I've begun to feel reasonably safe.

During the past five years I've traveled some, but not over a very wide area. I've spent some time in Florida and Texas, have been around the Caribbean Basin and along the Spanish Main, and have covered most European countries. Sometimes I've paid my way as I went, sometimes I've been broke. But I've never really been to where "the pavement ends."

AS TO adventures, I've known enough real men of real action to make me wary of telling many of my own. I've fought, here and there, when I couldn't get out of it, but I've never killed anybody or been shot at except legitimately as a soldier.

In 1921 I was almost shipwrecked one night in a squall off Porto Rico. I was traveling in a filthy little schooner, the one white man amongst forty blacks. But that pot-bellied little hooker with her yelping Africans came through unscathed, so that the yarn doesn't count for much.

When I was a kid in Florida, we were actually wrecked one morning off Gilbert's Bar in my father's yacht. The high point of this episode is that after we had hung in a very ticklish position for an hour we were saved by one Bill McCoy who came along in a ship named *Constitution* and took us aboard.

McCoy was then, and from all accounts, still is, a very gallant gentleman and one of the truest-hearted adventurers I've known. If you don't recognize his name, he is the whimsical, mighty McCoy—the Robin Hood McCoy—of Rum Row. It has been amusing to me to know that this man is the same who once called his ship *Constitution* in honor of that document which later was to develop the Eighteenth Amendment ulcer. Our "Red Gods" lead us into strange paths sometimes, don't they?

For the rest, I've been a deck-hand on a schooner and senior warden in a church. I've witnessed, at various times, some very nice bits of action. But usually I've been only a spectator. I've held a ringside seat while some other man did the splendid things.

"Generalissimo" is my first published story. I guess being here with it is the biggest adventure I've had.—DAVID R. SPARKS.

* * *

A LETTER from one of you to Hugh Pendexter. I refrain from comment because I share Major Brown's feelings on certain things in his letter and if I get started am likely to wax profusely violent. I'll just hope that he has been misinformed at least to a degree. Unfortunately I know that at least to a degree he has not. Here is his letter and the one he enclosed:

Governor's Office, National Home
for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers, Wisconsin.

You may recall me as I wrote to you some time ago while Chief of the 101st Division, U. S. A. *re* a crest for a medical regiment.

I FOUND what seems to me to be a gem of frontier history while going through some files recently. Seems the old gentleman who wrote it was writing at the time the bill was up to give pensions to the Indian War Veterans. At any rate it makes me proud to have been for so many years a member of the often "cussed" Regular Army.

I just read an account of a meeting in Chicago that was held by the Chicago Women's Club, the Association of Peace Education, and several others of a like ilk. They showed how Nathan Hale was roundly hissed when the Iowa schoolma'am speaking told how he was the kind that were a detriment to the nation. And not long ago I heard (from authorized sources) the story of the slacker's oath that has been going the rounds of students, "I will not bear arms for the nation, even in time of invasion by an enemy," and the audience at one of the Methodist Churches in Illinois, listening to the lecture of the most notorious wartime slacker we had and applauding him and hissing the Flag.

AND all this "bull" about not serving the nation in time of need! It makes me sick. So it is refreshing to read the enclosed letter. The critics of the Army and Navy (and we often needed critics, of the right sort) utterly forget that there would have been no nation except for the Army and Navy and that not a foot of railway could have crossed the West but for the suffering of the Regulars as told in the simple language of this old soldier, who is now on what is perhaps his death-bed. Send this to A. S. H., if you wish it for Camp-Fire but don't publish the old man's name as I have no authorization from him to do so.—Harry R. Brown.

P. S.—The best of it is they wish to teach the above Peace and Freedom Stuff as outlined in the schools! And they *are* in some schools.

The enclosed letter—it speaks for itself:

To give you a slight idea of the hardships and dangers soldiers serving in the early days at the Western frontiers had to endure, I write part of my personal experience, and you will admit that the hardships and dangers equaled those of the Civil War; therefore we request to be put near equal with those who served in the Civil War.

FROM July 8, 1870, to July 8, 1875, I served in Company "A," 17th U. S. Infantry, at that time stationed at a place (years ago washed away by the mighty Missouri River) called Grand River Agency. Arriving at said place most of us were sent about 25 miles up the river to cut and raft down logs to build necessary quarters and buildings. While building the Post we lived on hardtacks and bacon for about one year. Such as potatoes or other luxuries were unknown to us. Many times we were nights and days under arms, as the Indians were very hostile toward us, even, one time when Belton the white chief got killed, the Indians nearly succeeded in poisoning the whole garrison, which consisted of two companies of Infantry, from 35 to 40 men strong, each. Sometimes when we wanted to use the parade grounds (which the Indians also used for their war dances), we had to use all our available men, artillery, etc., to do so. Such as fighting and killing between different tribes occurred at times in the Post.

At one time the Indians took our cook (after stealing all eatables), bound him to a post and spit in his face while dancing around him. It did take everything available to rescue him. One soldier doing his duty (preventing an Indian from climbing into the blockhouse where we also kept ammunition) was sent that night alone in a boat down the river to save his life, as about 5,000 warriors demanded that he be turned over to them, and for several weeks after that time every person in the garrison was kept under arms, day and night. Numerous similar incidents happened very often.

EARLY in the Spring of 1872 Grand River Agency being removed to Standing Rock, our garrison did join the Yellowstone Expedition, consisting of 10 companies of Infantry and a few Indian Scouts, to protect the Northern Pacific Railroad engineers under General Rosseau. On this expedition our Company Commander, 1st Lieut. Crosby, lost his life, being killed, scalped and inhumanly mutilated by the Indians. Others shared the same fate. Arriving at Powder River where we were to meet an expedition from the West, under General Baker, we received news by an Indian courier that General Baker was prevented from meeting us on account of an overwhelming number of Indians, also that the Indians endangered Fort Rice. Our battalion was therefore ordered by forced march to Ft. Rice and, on account of scarcity of provisions, on half rations, which meant marching 40 miles each day on four hardtacks and some bacon. To make fire we had to dig buffalo chips, barehanded, from under the snow. The water was mostly filthy, unhealthy and not fit for drinking purposes. In due time we arrived at Ft. Rice, half starved, some barefooted, or only one shoe on, entirely worn out. One man in our company committed suicide and some deserted, being unable to endure the hardships any longer.

AFTER wintering at Ft. Rice, in the spring of 1873, our Company was again attached to the Yellowstone Expedition, consisting of 20 companies of Infantry, 10 companies of Cavalry, 6 pieces of artillery and numerous Indian Scouts, besides several hundred six-mule teams. On this expedition we went up the Yellowstone as far as Pampous Pillow, and then across to Mussleshell. In that part of the country we had numerous severe encounters with the Indians, and numerous officers, soldiers and civilians lost their lives, or got wounded. Most of the mules having died from hard traveling and starvation, caused by the Indians burning the prairies, and being therefore short on transportation, we were again compelled to live on short rations and insufficient clothing.

Arriving at the Yellowstone our Battalion was again ordered to Ft. Rice, where in due time we arrived in a pitiful condition, entirely worn out. This is only a part of my personal experience, as it would take a book to write all.— —— ——, Late Pvt., Co. "A", 17th U. S. Infantry.

* * *

OUR Camp-Fire Stations are spreading steadily over the map. Help make them grow. Any qualified person can start a Station.

A STATION may be in any shop, home or other reputable place. The only requirements are that a Station shall display the regular Station sign, provide a box or drawer for mail to be called for and preserve the register book.

No responsibility for mail is assumed by anybody; the Station merely uses ordinary care. Entries in register to be confined to name or serial number, route, destination, permanent address and such other brief notes or remarks as desired; each Station can impose its own limit on space to be used. Registers become permanent property of Station; signs remain property of this magazine, so that if there is due cause of complaint from members a Station can be discontinued by withdrawing sign.

A Station bulletin-board is strongly to be recommended as almost necessary. On it travelers can leave tips as to conditions of trails, etc., resident members can post their names and addresses, such hospitality as they care to offer, calls for any travelers who are familiar with countries these residents once knew, calls for particular men if they happen that way, etc., notices or tips about local facilities and conditions. Letters to resident members can be posted on this bulletin board.

Any one who wishes is a member of Camp-Fire and therefore entitled to the above Station privileges subject to the Keeper's discretion. Those offering hospitality of any kind do so on their own responsibility and at their own risk and can therefore make any discriminations they see fit. Traveling members will naturally be expected to remember that they are merely guests and act accordingly.

Keepers answer letters only if they wish. For local information write "Ask Adventure."

A Station may offer only the required register and mail facilities or enlarge its scope to any degree it pleases. Its possibilities as headquarters for a local club of resident Camp-Fire members are excellent.

The only connection between a Station and this magazine is that stated above, and a Keeper is in no other way responsible to this magazine nor representative of it.

Arizona—200—Clifton. C. Hooker.
209—Quartzite. Buck Conner, Box 4.
285—Yuma. W. P. Kline, 4th Ave. & 8th St.
Arkansas—161—Hot Springs. Tom Manning, Jr., 322 Morrison Ave.

California—28—Lost Hills. Mr. and Mrs. M. A. Monson, Cottage Inn.
60—San Bernardino. Charles A. Rouse, Hotel St. Augustine.
73—Galt. E. M. Cook, Box 256.
74—Eagle Rock. John R. Finney, 109 Eddy Ave.
89—Chico. K. W. Mason, 1428 Park Ave.
108—Helendale. G. R. Wells, P. O. Box 17.
113—Vallejo. Edith G. Engesser, Golden Triangle Rabbitry, Highway Homes.
114—Mill Valley. L. F. Guedet, Restawhyle Knoll.
115—Los Gatos. G. H. Johnson.
116—Sebastopol. Mrs. Lucy E. Hicks, 420 S. Main St.
126—Covelo. Whit H. Ham, Box 388.
141—Santa Cruz. A. W. Wyatt, Capitola Road and Jose Ave.
149—San Francisco. A. H. Hutchinson, Veteran Press, 1264 Valencia St.
186—Santa Ysabel. William Strover, Santa Ysabel Inn.
210—Berkeley. Dr. Louis C. Mullikin, 305 Acheson Bldg.
211—Pomona. Fred G. Sunley, 480 E. Alverado St.
212—Del Monte. Alex H. Sokoloff, 3rd Signal Co. R. O. T. C.
231—San Francisco. Earl V. Swift, 24-A Brady St.
251—Williams. Joe Lanouette, Opera Pool Hall.
252—Fresno. Mrs. Harriet Church, Echo Gardens, 712 Echo Ave.
257—San Francisco. K. F. Richards, 1807 Post St.
266—Santa Barbara. E. Chester Roberts, 714 State St.
273—Los Angeles. Henry M. Harrod, 6615 So. Main St.
286—Sacramento. Carl W. La Force, 2329 Eye St.
287—Stockton. Ivan J. Dill, 520 E. Washington St.
298—La Mesa. Alan Wanbough, 343 Spring Street.
310—Cajon Pass. Richard Hall; Hall's Auto Camp.
312—San Diego. Frank H. Huston, 2966 California St.
321—Banning. William Daustin, P. O. Box 36.
Colorado—105—Grand Junction, Bart Lynch, 236 Main St.
267—Sugar Loaf. Frank Earnest.
279—Denver. De Forrest E. Hall 2838 Arapahoe St.
Connecticut—142—Meriden. Homer H. Brown, 1 Colony Place.
Delaware—232—Delmar. J. A. Aniba, Stone House Hotel.
D. C.—167—Washington. Walter A. Sheil, 503 Sixth St. N.E.
Florida—87—Miami. A. C. Smith, 49 N. E. First St.
117—Miami. Miami Canoe Club, 115 S. W. South River Drive.
128—Titusville. Max von Koppelow, Box 1014.
138—St. Petersburg. Miss Maude V. Hughson, 2402 First Ave. So.
139—St. Petersburg. Capt. Lee Whetstone, Hotel Poinsettia.
143—St. Petersburg. J. G. Barnhill, 19 Third St. N.
158—Crescent City. E. N. Clark, care *Call*.
188—Johnson. Clifford Martin.
258—Jacksonville. T. J. Eppes, The Hobby Shop.
262—Wildwood. E. M. Dilly, L. B. 114.
285—Tampa. R. Stuart Murray, Mezzanine Floor, Hillsboro Hotel.
288—Orlando. O. D. Young, 112 Court St.
318—Chipley. Jack H. Shivers, P. O. Box 53, Along the Old Spanish Trail.
322—New Pomona. Ed. N. Clark. Putnam District Progress.
Georgia—98—Hinesville. R. N. Martin, *The Liberty County Herald*.
289—Monticello. O. E. Wells.
Idaho—110—Pocatello. C. W. Craig, 223 S. Second Ave.
Illinois—66—Chester. Capt. W. B. Barter.
66—Mt. Carmel. W. C. Carter, 1122 Chestnut St.
67—Plainfield. J. P. Glass, The Linshield Co.
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253—Chicago. G. C. Huebner, 2608 Magnolia Ave.
290—Gibson City. J. D. Ashley, 117 Sangamon Ave.
303—Chicago. Leslie C. Marshall, 9155 Normal Blvd.
312—Paxton. Oscar Olson.
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90—Linton. Herschell Isom, 73 Tenth St., N. E.
180—Warsaw. Homer Lewis.
287—Vincennes. John C. Maloney, 1004 N. Seventh St.
Iowa—238—Atlantic. George Woodbury, 5 E. Third St.
Kansas—228—Leavenworth. Ben H. Lukenbill, 315 Shawnee St.
Kentucky—144—Corbin. Keith Mauney.
190—Louisville. H. S. Summers, 421 W. Jefferson St.
Louisiana—140—New Orleans. J. D. Montgomery, Navy Recruiting Office.
228—St. Rose. C. M. Elfer.
Maine—19—Bangor. Dr. G. E. Hathorne, 70 Main St.
59—Augusta. Robie M. Liscomb, 73½ Bridge St.
111—Lewiston. Howard N. Lary, 714 Main Street.
243—Winthrop. O. A. Abbot.
320—East Sullivan. H. B. Stanwood.
Maryland—55—Baltimore. Henry W. L. Fricke, 1200 E. Madison St., at Asquith.
82—Baltimore. Joseph Patti, Jr., 4014 E. Lombard St.
151—Williamsport. L. J. Schaefer, Frederick St.
Massachusetts—56—Watertown Arsenal. E. Worth Benson, Station Hospital.
274—Everett. Aubrey S. McLellan, 4 Marion Place.
Michigan—69—Grand Rapids. Dr. A. B. Muir, 1121 Turner Ave., N. W.
79—Lansing. Geo. H. Allen, *Lansing Industrial News*, 109½ N. Washington Ave.
106—Gaylord. Sidney M. Cook.
131—Muskegon. James Fort Forsyth, Forsythia, R. F. D. No. 3.
137—Flint. O'Leary & Livingston, 309 So. Saginaw St.
192—Pickford. Dr. J. A. Cameron, The Grand Theater.
227—Adrian. S. N. Cook, 221 Clinton St.
Minnesota—112—St. Paul. St. Paul *Daily News*, 92 E. Fourth St.
145—St. Cloud. F. T. Tracy, 502 6th Ave. South.
299—Minneapolis. Russell Hearne, 411 First Ave. N.
311—Canby. Joe Millard, Minnesota State Fair.
Mississippi—88—Tunica. C. S. Swann, Tunica Plumbing & Electric Shop.
99—Picayune. D. E. Jonson.
268—Pascagoula. C. E. Walter, 239 Orange St.
Missouri—51—St. Louis. W. R. Hoyt, 7921 Van Buren St., phone Riverside 250.
94—St. Louis. C. Carter Lee, M. D., 3819 Olive St.
127—Salem. Emmet C. Higgins, 100 N. Tenth St.
289—Nevada. T. S. Hope, 705 N. Clay St.
Montana—240—Fort Missoula. Company C, 4th Infantry.
254—Hamilton. Mrs. Lucy Hyde, 64 N. Second St.
288—Anaconda. R. T. Newman.
Nebraska—95—Omaha. L. W. Stewart, 119 No. 16th St.
214—Tecumseh. Dr. C. F. Roh.
New Hampshire—316—Concord. R. E. Colby, 81 N. Main St.
319—Clairmont. Frank H. Moose, Box 25.
New Mexico—96—Silver City. Edward S. Jackson, Box 435.
203—Elephant Butte via Engle. Henry Stein.
229—Santa Fé. N. Howard Thorp, 103 Palace Ave.
290—Santa Fé. Ralph E. Pierson.
New Jersey—91—Tenafly. Ed Stiles, P. O. Box 254.
146—Paterson. Charles S. Gall, 378 Dakota St.
164—Chatham. Roy S. Tinney.
244—East Orange. Alfred C. Swenson, 77 Lawton St.
245—Corbin City. Lee Roberts.
260—Camden. Benj. P. Thomas, 2791 Constitution Rd.
269—South Orange. Eugene Connett, 170 Turrel Ave.
275—Camden. Captain Herbert George Sparrow, Ship No. 1269 Naval Post, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Armory of Second Battalion, Naval Militia of New Jersey, Temple Theater Building, 415 Market St.
314—Jersey City. C. Dieze, Follansbee's Rest, Inc.
New York—23—Jamestown. W. E. Jones, 906 Jefferson St.
34—New York City. St. Mary's Men's Club, 142 Alexander Ave., Bronx, N. Y. C.
147—Youngsville. Harry Malowitz, Youngsville House.
165—Saratoga. Wm. Marshall, Office No. 9, Chamber of Commerce Arcade.
177—Brooklyn. George Iverson, 306 Macon St.
185—Brooklyn. J. M. Canavan, 69 Bond St.
193—Niagara Falls. Roy Tompkins, 1155 Garret Ave.
194—Hadley. Mrs Chas. H. Black.
205—Newburgh. Jacques Teller, 5 Golden St.
215—Yonkers. George's Sport Shop, 45 Main St.
226—Red Hook. P. W. E. Hart, The Silver Birch Shop, Albany Post Road, Dutchess Co.
230—New York City. Fred G. Taylor, 424 Broadway, Dobbs Ferry.
233—Albany. R. N. Bradley, 84 Livingston Ave.
239—Valley Stream, Long Island. Arthur Borchmann, Centarlane.
298—Walton. S. K. Sherman.
311—Brooklyn. Harry A. Odell, 4 Lafayette Ave.
314—Binghamton. Harold E. Snedeker, 41 Riverside St.
North Carolina—92—Biltmore. C. Marshall Gravatt, Felstone Co
133—Pine Bluff. N. Steve Hutchings.
159—Waynesville. Harry M. Hall, 720 Walnut St.
255—Tryon. Howard Shannon.
315—Charlotte. Coverse Harwell, P. O Box 1368.
North Dakota—206—Fairmount. Frank Kitchener, Richland Hotel.
Ohio—52—Uhrichsville. Anthony Sciarra, 329 W. Fourth St.
58—Cleveland. J. F. Thompson, Community Pharmacy, 9505 Denison Ave.
63—Uhrichsville. Chas. F. Burroway, 312 Water St.

75—Columbus. Chas. W. Jenkins, 54 S. Burgess Ave.
113—Buena Vista. Geo. T. Watters.
166—Toledo. Frank P. Carey, 3267 Maplewood Ave., or wherever his Ford happens to be.
207—Columbus. Tod S. Raper, 77 Taylor Ave.
241—Cincinnati. D. W. Davidson, 1414 Vine St.
242—Bellefontaine. Harry E. Edselle, 328 Plumvalley St.
263—Toledo. F. P. Carey, Box 143, Station A.
264—Toledo. S. G. La Plante, 1820 Dunham St.
291—Ravenna. McGraw and Eckler.
292—Oberlin. E. A. Sherrill, Sherrill Acres, Chicago-Buffalo Highway, State Route No. 2.
Oklahoma—57—Haskell. Roy Holt.
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225—Shawnee. A. M. Postlethwaite, 521 N. Beard St.
234—Blackwell. H. W. Willis, 204½ N. Main St.
Oregon—4—Salem. D. Wiggins.
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Pennsylvania—20—Philadelphia. Wm. A. Fulmer, 267 S. Ninth St.
21—Braddock. Clarence Jenkins, Union News Co.
24—Philadelphia. Alfred A. Krombach, 4159 N. Eighth Street, and Spring Mills Station, P. & R. Ry. Co., Montgomery County.
78—Pittsburgh. Peter C. Szarmach, 3030 Brereton St.
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261—Shippensberg. *The Chronicle*, 12 South Earl St.
312—Athens. Thomas L. Stalford, The Hiker (Spanish War Hdqts.), 112 N. Main St.
South Dakota—179—Fairburn. Jesse K. Fell, *Custer County Press*.
270—Centerville. C. H. Hornbeck, *The Centerville Journal*.
South Carolina—97—Charleston. J. W. Mette, Navy Yard.
217—Charleston. J. H. Keener, 346 King St.
293—Florence. S. B. Stacey.
Tennessee—195—Knoxville. C. G. Pruden, 2024 Rose Ave.
Texas—33—Houston. J. M. Shamblin, 4805 Oakland St.
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134—Breckenridge. Joe Randel, 226 Baylor Avenue.
148—Port Arthur. Ralph C. Cornwell, 215 Eighth St.
174—San Angelo. E. M. Weeks, 24 West Eighth St.
183—South San Antonio. J. F. Nicodemus, Box 111, So. San Antonio Transfer.
218—Fort Worth. Robert Lentz, R No. 6 Box 73.
271—Harlingon. H. C. Jennings, Box 324.
280—Reese. L. H. Baker.
294—Coleman. Clyde Ransberger.
300—Pecos. Oram Green, Third and Cedar Sts.
310—El Paso. H. B. Stout, 1114 North Copia St.
316—Novice. J. Bab Lewis, Cashier, Novice State Bank.

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219—Richmond. Wm. Meek, 104 S. 1st St.
Washington—1—Ione. Evan Morgan, Albert's Billiard Hall.
61—Burlington. Judge B. N. Albertson, Fairhaven Ave.
83—Seattle. Chas. D. Raymer, Raymer's Old Book-Store, 1330 First Ave.
154—Mt. Vernon. Miss Beatrice Bell, Western Washington Auto Club.
155—Olympia. B. F. Hume, Commercial Club Rooms.
172—Sunnyside. Mark Austin.
196—Arlington. F. T. Herzinger.
220—Sultan. George W. Snyder, Main St., opp. P. O.
281—Warm Beach. Paul E. Vollum and Kirkham Evans, Evans Bldg.
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299—Fairmount. Dr. J. W. Ballard, 314 Main St.
317—Clarksburg. W. G. Hamrick, 117 Short St.

Wisconsin—41—Madison. Frank Weston, 401 Gay Bldg.
Alaska—295—Ketchikan. Thwaites Photo Shop, Ingersoll Hotel Bldg., Front St.
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76—Victoria. Chas. M. Healy, 30, The Avenue, Windsor Post, Dist. No. 8.
130—Brisbane. H. V. Shead, Sutton St., Kangaroo Pt.
235—Sydney. Phillip Norman, 842 Military Road, Nosman, Newtown.
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British Columbia—231—Stewart. Jack O'Shea, Ryan Bldg.
236—Vancouver. A. Johnson, 552-3 Hastings St.
Canada—31—Howe Sound, B. C. C. Plowden, Plowden Bay.
84—White Rock, B. C. Charles L. Thompson.
22—Burlington, Ontario. T. M. Waumsly, Jocelyn Bookstore.
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85—Oshawa, Ontario. J. Worral, 6½ King St. E.
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124—Hartshorn, Alberta. Leonard Brown, 33-34-17 W4M.
178—Moncton, N. B. Chas. H. McCall, 178 St. George St.
221—Montreal East. M. M. Campbell, 95 Broadway.
249—Fallowfield, Ontario. Ernest Armstrong.
250—Sault Ste. Marie. James McDonald, 504 Queen St. E.
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277—Barrie, Ontario. R. F. Smith.
300—Halifax, N. S. Audler S. Lee, 551 Gottingen St.
Canal Zone—37—Cristobal. F. E. Stevens.
156—Ancon. Arthur Haughton, Box 418.
China—222—Tientsin. Dr. George W. Twomey, 43 Rue de Amiraute.
Cuba—15—Havana. Ricardo N. Farres Dominquez, y Cerro.
England—296—Longton, Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire. William Berry, 19 Weston Place, off Heathcote Road.
Egypt—173—Khartoum, Sudany. W. T. Moffat, Sudan Customs.
Germany—283—Dusseldorf. Hans Derrick Hulsmann, care R. A. Visser & Co.
Guatamala—315—Puerto Barrios. John R. Strange, United Fruit Co.
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272—Honolulu, Hawaii. Hubert T. Miller, Room 4, Silent Hotel.
Honduras, C. A.—70—La Ceiba. Jos. Buckly Taylor.
India—197—Calcutta. W. Leishman, 46 Wellesley St.
Mexico—68—Guadalajara, Jal. W. C. Money, Hotel Fenix, Calle Lopez, Cotilla Nos. 269 a 281.
Navy—71—U. S. *Arizona*. Elmer E. McLean.
Newfoundland—132—St. John's. P. C. Mars, Smallwood Bldg.
Nova Scotia—297—Dartmouth. W. E. Sievert, Portland St.
Porto Rico—46—Ensenada. M. B. Couch, P. O. Box 5.
Philippine Islands—198—Manila. W. W. Weston, De La Rama Bldg.
Virgin Islands—301—St. Thomas. Joseph Reynolds; The Grand Hotel.

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Lost Trails, for finding missing relatives and friends, runs in alternate issues from "Old Songs That Men Have Sung."

Old Songs That Men Have Sung, a section of "Ask Adventure," runs in alternate issues from "Lost Trails."

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Ask Adventure

A Free Question and Answer Service Bureau of Information on Outdoor Life and Activities Everywhere and Upon the Various Commodities Required Therein. Conducted for *Adventure* Magazine by Our Staff of Experts.

QUESTIONS should be sent, not to this office, but direct to the expert in charge of the section in whose field it falls. So that service may be as prompt as possible, he will answer you by mail direct. But he will also send to us a copy of each question and answer, and from these we shall select those of most general interest and publish them each issue in this department, thus making it itself an exceedingly valuable standing source of practical information. Unless otherwise requested inquirer's name and town are printed with question; street numbers not given.

When you ask for *general* information on a given district or subject the expert may give you some valuable general pointers and refer you to books or to local or special sources of information.

Our experts will in all cases answer to the best of their ability, using their own discretion in all matters pertaining to their sections, subject only to our general rules for "Ask Adventure," but neither they nor the magazine assumes any responsibility beyond the moral one of trying to do the best that is possible. These experts have been chosen by us not only for their knowledge and experience but with an eye to their integrity and reliability. We have emphatically assured each of them that his advice or information is not to be affected in any way by whether a given commodity is or is not advertised in this magazine.

1. **Service free to anybody, provided self-addressed envelop and *full* postage, *not attached,* are enclosed. Correspondents writing to or from foreign countries will please enclose International Reply Coupons, purchasable at any post-office, and exchangeable for stamps of any country in the International Postal Union. Be sure that the issuing office stamps the coupon in the left-hand circle.**
2. **Send each question direct to the expert in charge of the particular section whose field covers it. He will reply by mail. Do NOT send questions to this magazine.**
3. **No reply will be made to requests for partners, for financial backing, or for chances to join expeditions. "Ask Adventure" covers business and work opportunities, but only if they are outdoor activities, and only in the way of general data and advice. It is in no sense an employment bureau.**
4. **Make your questions definite and specific. State exactly your wants, qualifications and intentions. Explain your case sufficiently to guide the expert you question.**
5. **Send no question until you have read very carefully the exact ground covered by the particular expert in whose section it seems to belong.**

> *Please Note:* To avoid using so much needed space each issue for standing matter and to gain more space for the actual meat of "Ask Adventure" the full statement of its various sections and of "Lost Trails" will be given only in alternate issues. **In other issues only the bare** names of the sections will be given, inquirers to get exact fields covered and names and addresses from full statement in alternate issues. Do *not* write to the magazine, but to the editors of the **sections at their home addresses.**

1—3. The Sea. In Three Parts
4—6. Islands and Coasts. In Three Parts
7, 8. New Zealand and the South Sea Islands. In Two Parts
9. Australia and Tasmania
10. Malaysia, Sumatra and Java
11. New Guinea
12, 13. Philippine and Hawaiian Islands
13—18. Asia. In Five Parts
19—26. Africa. In Eight Parts
27, 28. Turkey and Asia Minor
29—35. Europe. In Six Parts
36—38. South America. In Three Parts
39. Central America
40—42. Mexico. In Three Parts
43—51. Canada. In Nine Parts
52. Alaska
53. Baffinland and Greenland
54—59. Western U. S. In Six Parts
60—64. Middle Western U. S. In Five Parts
65—74. Eastern U. S. In Ten Part
A. Radio
B. Mining and Prospecting
C. Old Songs That Men Have Sung
D1—3. Weapons, Past and Present. In Three Parts
E. Salt and Fresh Water Fishing
F, G. Forestry in the U. S. and Tropical Forestry
H—J. Aviation, Army and Navy Matters
K. American Anthropology North of Panama Canal
L. First Aid on the Trail
M. Health-Building Outdoors
N. Railroading in the U. S., Mexico and Canada
O. P. Herpetology and Entomology
Standing Information

Ecuador

CHANCES in the Rio Napo country.

Request:—"I would like to get some information concerning the Rio Napo country in Ecuador, its climate, minerals and chances for a man who has a little money and wishes to do a little tropical farming.

Would you be kind enough to answer the following:

1. What is the climate like? (Is it something like Guatemala?)
2. Is the land suitable for bananas?
3. What other things could you raise? (*i. e.* for marketing and export.)
4. If you raised bananas could you find a market for them and could you get them to a shipping point?
5. Is the Rio Napo navigable? How far up?
6. Would an Evenrude motor (outboard) be of any service?
7. What would you advise in the way of a motor-boat?
8. Is there a rainy and dry season? When is the dry season?
9. Which is the best time to go there? Exactly when would you suggest that we arrive in the country?
10. Are there any peculiar customs regulations?
11. Are guns prohibited? Can we carry any kind of guns into the country including a machine gun?
12. Can we carry anything into country we wish for trading with the natives?
13. What articles would you advise as best suitable for trading and is it possible to do any trading during the off-season to help bear expenses?
14. Could the labor be gotten with trade goods and would it be possible to make enough money until our crops came in through trading to keep us going?
15. What are the natives like? Are they hostile?
16. What implements should we take?
17. Is there any money to be made there in mahogany?
18. What minerals?
19. Any diamonds?
20. Are there many snakes? Would we have to be careful on account of them?
21. Are there many crocodiles in the river?
22. Could we live on the wild game—that is, providing we have flour and beans, etc.?
23. What is the very least money you would advise us to leave this country with?
24. Could we get any rubber in that section?

There will be two of us in the party and we have both had experience in the tropics.

Thanking you for any further information you might give me."—Emile Bouchard, Brooklyn, N. Y.

Reply, by Mr. Young:—1. On the Pacific side typically tropical—humid, hot, unhealthy; in the highlands—bleak, cold, almost barren in places; mountains capped with snow; a few volcanoes—on the eastern side temperate in the higher slopes; hot, humid, tropical in the Amazon basin, also too much rain on that side of the big mountains. The climate of certain portions of the highlands is similar to Guatemala although the lowlands are more tropical.

2. Yes, the western coast.

3. Cacao, vanilla, panama hat fiber, and various other typical tropical products.

4. Yes.

5. The Napo is navigable as far up as Agua Rica for small river steamers. Large canoes float down from far above that and are poled back.

6. Down below Agua Rica an Evenrude would be O. K., above that it would be of little use.

7. I would prefer a canoe to a motor-boat for the Napo alone.

8. The rainy and dry seasons are not pronounced on that side of the Andes in Ecuador and there is excessive rain.

9. To Guayaquil by Panama Railroad boat direct from New York, G. & Q. R. R. to Quito, hike the rest.

10. You can get custom regulations from the Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, Washington, D. C.

11. Under a .38 calibre not prohibited. Over that, yes.

12. A free list of what you will be allowed to enter with will be furnished by the Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, Washington, D. C. The free list is very liberal and will allow you to bring in almost anything you desire.

13. Axes, single-barrelled shot-guns, Wintersmith's Chill Tonic, gauze underwear, knives, beads, calico.

14. Yes.

15. Very tame.

16. Whatever you would take for a similar trip up here.

17. No.

18. Gold, possibly others.

19. No diamonds have been found.

20. There are supposed to be numerous snakes but you will scarcely ever encounter one.

21. Yes.

22. Yes, in good game portions of the country.

23. $1,000.

24. Yes.

Write Pan American Union, Washington, D. C., for booklet "Ecuador." See Encyclopedia Britannica under same headings. See numerous books listed under Ecuador in your Montague St. library.

Names and addresses of department editors and the exact field covered by each section are given in the next issue of the magazine. Do NOT write to the magazine itself.

China

DANGEROUS and interesting.

Request:—Enclosed find stamps to pay postage, also for envelope.

I am planning a trip for friends and myself to the Orient. As I have never traveled in that part of the world, I will ask you to be so kind as to send me a letter relating to the weather, living conditions, transportation, expenses and what of English speaking people; if any of the natives are friendly to white people and of what kind of hunting that may be expected."—P. M. Stewart, Aurora, Col.

Reply, by Dr. Twomey:—Travel in China is attended by some discomfort if you attempt to travel in the interior. Just now the unsettled conditions in many parts of the country make traveling dangerous. In many parts of the country, bands of bandits are making things very unpleasant for both Chinese and foreigners and the authorities advise against traveling in the interior. However, if you have never been in China you can see many interesting sights in the Treaty Ports. The weather in North China isn't much different from the weather in Colorado. In summer the thermometer frequently reaches a hundred and in the winter it often goes to five or ten below zero. Bring the same sort of clothing that you would use at home.

Living conditions: There are good hotels in all the large cities that you would be likely to visit. These hotels are all operated on the American plan: so much per day for rooms and board. The usual rate is eight to ten dollars, Chinese money per day. This is about four or five dollars U. S. currency.

Transportation: Depends on where you want to go. There are a few railroads. Coast and river steamers are plentiful. In the interior, travel is by means of mules, horses, camels, canal boats, chairs and wheelbarrows—it all depends on where you are and where you are going.

You will find very few English speaking people outside the larger cities. If you travel in the interior you will need an interpreter. Just at present there is a lot of anti-foreign agitation going on and it is not advisable for you to try to travel in the interior of the country. Just a few days ago a prominent American was murdered and another man taken captive by a gang of bandits in Manchuria. We who live here cannot tell where this anti-foreign agitation is going to end and my advice is to stick to the Treaty Ports.

There is plenty of hunting in China but to find it you must leave the cities and go into some of the remote provinces. If you decide to come out here, write me again and give me the date of your arrival and I will do what I can to fix up a good trip for you.

Black Fox Farming

THE following article on this profitable form of fur raising has been prepared in the form of leaflets which may be obtained from the expert who wrote it, Mr. F. L. Bowden:

SO MANY times people ask me whether there is money in Black fox farming. I usually say there is. If I am doubted I refer to any one of fifty or more successful black fox farmers on Prince Edward Island, Canada, and elsewhere. To my personal knowledge there are several men who have become very wealthy through raising black and silver foxes for their skins.

In spite of the above I seldom advise any one to enter that business. Those who have made most of the money in black foxes have not done so through raising them, but through selling stock in their ventures; and most of the big men in the game, if you talk with them, will tell of the wonderful lot of skins they will have to market next year. My observation is that success in this business is always just around the corner.

It is no business for the inexperienced. I can not think of any other business off-hand where the percentage of failures had been any greater than in black fox raising. This is not to be wondered at when one considers the number of failures in—let us say—even the chicken business. Just go over in your own mind the number of your personal friends who have started in the chicken business.

And right here is something to paste in your hat: Chicken raising is as easy as taking candy from a baby compared with raising foxes. The reason? Sure. Domestic fowl have been bred for their present mode of living for five or six centuries; foxes have never been kept in captivity in numbers until the last ten or fifteen years. This, coupled with the fact that even the oldest of the fox farmers will tell you he has an awful lot to learn about his business, is the secret.

Many times my questioners ask: Can't I read up on the subject, and then start in with some assurance of success? The answer is: What are you going to read? All that is known about fox raising has been gained through costly experience, by those engaged in the business, and they, naturally, are not giving away any more of their knowledge than they have to.

A pair of black foxes for breeding purposes is a pretty expensive proposition. A good pair will set you back from two thousand to twenty-five hundred dollars. To start, a man would want at least three or four pair to make a business of it.

Feeding is a tough proposition. Don't think of starting until you have made sure of your food supply. On Prince Edward Island, horse meat appears to give best satisfaction. In Maine on some of the big fox farms, beef and fresh tripe are used. In most cases the meat is partly cooked.

The animals are fed twice a day, early in the morning and just before sundown. The beginner has to guard against feeding his animals too much. I suppose more foxes on farms have been killed by overfeeding than by any other cause. Give them all the clean, cold water they can drink at all times. If a brook runs through the farm all the better, if clean. But skip the food for a day each week, say Sundays. The foxes will be better for it. Remember the fox is a mighty active animal, and he gets little opportunity, or has little inclination, to properly exercise in the farm pens, even though they are large.

Each pen should be no less than fifty by fifty feet—this for one pair of foxes. The fence should be of mesh wire not less than six feet high. The bottom of the wire should be set into the ground for three feet or more to discourage digging under the fence, this is very important.

The animals are paired off in August of each year. It is sometimes necessary to change the animals five or six times before they are satisfied to mate. For the fox, when he does mate, mates for life, the same as the wolf.

They breed in February usually and from that time until the kits—young foxes—are big enough to leave the vixen—mother fox—the farmer has his work cut out for him. The mother, in company with many other wild animals in captivity, has the bad habit of destroying her offspring, not in every case, to be sure, but very frequently. Many a kit has to be raised by hand. Sometimes they are given to a good mother who has lost her brood.

My advice to any one thinking of going into fox farming is to go to Prince Edward Island, or to Maine. I understand there are now several fox farms also in Oregon and Washington on the Pacific coast. Go to some farm and work at the business if possible. Anyway, stick around the farm from which you buy your foxes and learn everything possible, and after you have done this you will still be shy of a lot of stuff you should know.

Be sure to construct the dens out of wood—drawing furnished on request—in such a way that they may be easily cleaned and disinfected, for be it known that foxes are about the worst housekeepers in the animal kingdom.

The diseases foxes in captivity are most subject to are digestive troubles and vermin. The animal is watched every day. If he is "off his feed" it is usually indigestion. If his fur is rough and dull, it is pretty sure to be vermin, and remember that in a couple of weeks vermin can completely ruin a pelt worth a thousand dollars.

If the writer were starting to raise fur he would more likely go in for muskrats than foxes. Reason—he's naturally lazy and the rats are a lot less work.—F. L. BOWDEN.

"Ask Adventure" service costs you nothing whatever but reply postage and self-addressed envelop.

More About Japanese Swords

IN A recent issue our expert on Japan, Miss Knudson, answered at length a query on Japanese swords which has brought forth this more than interesting letter from a Japanese student.

To the Miss Knudson (Japan Dep't.)
Adventure Magazine,
New York, U. S. A.

DEAR MISS:

I was quite interested to read and glad to know that the topic of Japan's ancient civilization was treated in the "Adventure" issue of August 20, 1925, and I am surprised at your vast knowledge of same. I have never been out of Japan, yet your knowledge seems the product of practical experience here. However, there are some points which you missed when answering Mr. Roger B. Wilson, and I hope you will have the following printed in *Adventure* as it will interest him and many other readers:

Question No. 1. Japanese swords varied in length according to their purpose, viz:

DAI-TO or TACHI was more than 2 ft. long
SHO-TO or WAKIZASHI about 1 ft. 8 ins. long
TAN-TO or KWAIKEN 11 ins. long
NAGA-WAKIZASHI about 2 ft. long

The Samurai wore DAI-TO & SHO-TO in time of peace and TACHI, WAKIZASHI, & YOROI-DOSHI in war time.

TAN-TO swords were used only for commiting hara-kiri and were used by women for their personal protection.

NAGA-WAKIZASHI was used only by "Chonin" or commoners for defence purposes only.

There were basic ideas governing such a variety of swords, for instance:

DAI-TO was intended for use in their Lords' service, and not otherwise.

SHO-TO was intended for Samurai's hara-kiri or women's protection.

YOROI-DOSHI was somewhat similar to the TAN-TO but was specially intended to behead enemies on the fields of battle despite protective armour (or Yoroi), and was consequently termed Yoroi-doshi (Armour-piercer).

NAGA-WAKIZASHI, as stated above, was for the defense use of individual commoners.

The style of above swords are as follows:

DAI-TO, sho-to and NAGA-WAKIZASHI have protective hilts and KO-ZUKAS (little knives attached to the sword-sheath in purpose of attacking enemies by throwing them).

Question No. 2. The DAIMIO in the Hojyo period, also the Ashikaga Oda and Toyotomi periods, were all men who gained such distinction by bravery and strength, which the reason many of their swords were so splendid and of unusual length or value; but the Daimio of the Tokugawa era wore their weapons more as ornament than to utilize.

Question No. 3. They used many weapons, but the following were the commonest:

Lance (or Yari)
Bow & Arrows (or Yumi-Ya)
Guns (or Teppo)
Swords (or Katana)
Iron Staffs (or Tetsubo) some of which were over 300 lbs. in weight.

Question No. 4. Yes, they wore very heavy armours and helmets (or Yoroi-Kamuto), but on the introduction of the gun by the Portugees, much of heavy armour was discarded so as to facilitate movements. Armour was of two styles, the one being somewhat similar to what is known to have been used in Western countries long ago, the other of which numerous sets are in U. S. A. museums.

Question No. 5. I am very sorry I can not express on paper how they (the Samurai) were expert in fighting. For instance every Daimio kept two or more teachers at hand, whose descendants have brought the present-day JUDO and KENDO to us. Both these means of defense were only two of many employed by the ancient fighters.

Question No. 6. Usually mail was worn under the armour, and cloth hats under the helmets.

Question No. 7. Yes, they did fight often to keep up their honour and sustain the Bushi-do cult, but official Bushi-do strictly forbid such constant quarrels, especially where a personal element was involved.

Question No. 8. As remarked above, the Wakizashi swords were used only for purpose of defence, NOT for attacking.

Question No. 9. Those you mention acted as officials in time of peace and officers in war time.

Question No. 10 and 11. The Samurai favoured both Buddism and Shintoism, the latter being the recognised national religion. The officers called Bushi or Samurai themselves.

Apologising for my poor language, but trusting the above will open up some points puzzling your countryman, I remain Yours sincerely, SHIGENOBU YAMAMOTO, Kobe, Japan.

Old Songs That Men Have Sung

Devoted to outdoor songs, preferably hitherto unprinted—songs of the sea, the lumber-camps, Great Lakes, the West, old canal days, the negro, mountains, the pioneers, etc. Send in what you have or find, so that all may share in them.

Although this department is conducted primarily for the collection and preservation of old songs, the editor will give information about modern ones when he can do so and *IF* all requests are accompanied with self-addressed envelop and reply postage (*NOT* attached). Write to Mr. Gordon direct, *NOT* to the magazine.

Conducted by R. W. GORDON, care of *Adventure*, Spring and Macdougal Sts., New York City.

HERE is the best of a number of different versions of "The Game of Coon-Can" that have come in to the department during the past two years. It comes from W. F. B. who picked it up "from a 'blowed-in-the-glass stiff' in the 'jungles' at Livingston, Montana."

It would be hard to find a better illustration of how many folk songs are undoubtedly created. The story is simple and rather conventional; it includes situations and incidents that have often been sung in other familiar songs. So whenever the singer comes to one of these familiar incidents or situations he falls back on the words of the other song. This is natural and probably almost unconscious. We do the same thing when we begin our fairy stories, as did our fathers before us, "Now once upon a time there lived a king who had two daughters. . . ."

In the song below you will find stanzas lifted almost bodily from "The Boston Burglar," "The Rambling Boy," the old ballad of "The Maid Freed From the Gallows" (often called "The Hangman Tree") and from several others. Yet the result is far from being mere patchwork; it is an effective and on the whole a new story, pressing into service a number of old stanzas.

The Game of Coon-Can

(*Text of W. F. B.*)

I went down to play a hand of coon-can;
I could not play my hand,
For I kept thinking of the girlie I loved
Ran away with another man.

Ran away with another man, poor boy,
Ran away with another man.
For I kept thinking of the girlie I loved
Ran away with another man.

I went down to the old depot
Just to watch the trains roll by;
I thought I saw the girlie I loved—
Hung down my head and cried.

The night was dark and stormy
And it surely looked like rain;
I had not a friend in the whole wide world,
And nobody knew my name.

I caught a freight to Boston town—
I'd already searched the west—
For I was bent on finding
The girl that I loved best.

I landed in a fair little city
And there I found my pal;
I shot him once right through the heart
Just because he stole my gal.

The jury found me guilty,
And the clerk he wrote it down;
The judge he passed the sentence on me,
And now I'm going to the penitentiary.

"Oh, say there, Mr. Hangman,
Won't you wait just a little while?
I think I see the girlie I loved,
And she's come for many a mile."

"Sweetheart, have you brought me silver?
Sweetheart, have you brought me gold?
Or have you come to see me hang
On yonder hangman's pole?"

"Yes, George, I've brought you silver,
And a stocking full of gold;
I could not bear to see you die
On yonder hangman's pole."

She took me in her parlor,
And she cooled me with her fan;
With the tears streaming down her cheeks she said,
"I love my highway-man."

QUITE different in its technique, and obviously of the "author" type, is the version of "My Wild Colonial Boy," sent in by Mr. R. G. Shaw, who not long ago sent us the excellent lumberjack song of "The Wahnapetae."

My Wild Colonial Boy

(*Text of R. G. Shaw*)

There was a wild Colonial Boy,
  Jack Doolan was his name;
He came from Ireland's sunny isle,
  From a place called Castlemaine.
He was his father's only son,
  His mother's pride and joy;
And dearly did those parents love
  That wild Colonial Boy.

At the early age of sixteen years
  He left his happy home,
And to Australia's sunny isle
  Was much inclined to roam.
At the early age of eighteen years
  He began his wild career,
With a heart that knew no mercy
  And a mind that knew no fear.

He robbed the rich, he helped the poor,
  He stabbed Jack Macelroy,
Who trembling gave his gold up
  To that wild Colonial Boy.
He robbed the wealthy squires
  And their homes he did destroy,
For the terror of Australia
  Was that wild Colonial Boy.

One morning in the springtime
  As Jack he rode along
A-listening to the mocking bird
  As she sang her lofty song,
He spied three mounted troopers,
  Kelly, Davis, and Fitz-Roy;
They all cried out "Let's capture him,
  The wild Colonial Boy.

"Surrender now, Jack Doolan,
  You are a plundering son,
Surrender in the Queen's high name,
  For your career is done."
He drew a pistol from his belt
  And waved it up on high,
"I'll fight but not surrender,"
  Cried my wild Colonial Boy.

He fired a shot at Kelly
  Which brought him to the ground,
And in reply to Davis
  Gave him his deadly wound.
When a bullet sharp pierced his proud heart
  From the pistol of Fitz-Roy,
And that was how they captured him,
  My wild Colonial Boy.

A REQUEST has just come in for a song supposed to have been local to Rennselaer County which went in part as follows:

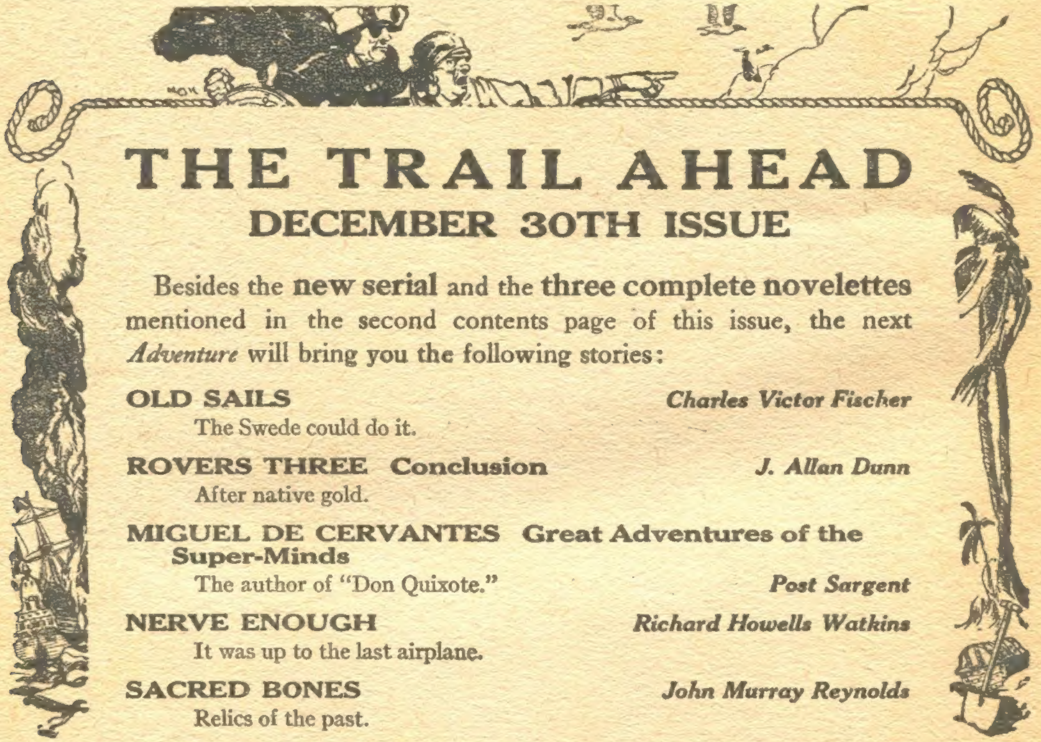
The moon was shining silver bright,
The sheriff came out at dead of night,
High on a rock stood an Indian true
And on his horn this blast he blew:

Look out the way for Big Bill Sydner,
Look out the way for Big Bill Sydner,
Look out the way for Big Bill Sydner,
For he'll tar your coat and feather your hide, sir.

It seems to be a parody on "Old Dan Tucker," and was probably sung to that tune. Can any one supply the remainder of the song, or give any information as to the circumstances which caused it?

REMEMBER that although I shall not be able to send many copies of songs in response to requests from you during the time that I am on the trip, I hope to receive more letters than ever from you. Copies of songs, information concerning districts where they can be found, hints as to who might be able to sing them for me, letters of introduction to local friends—all these will help greatly. I shall be unable to reply at length to your letters, but will try to send in return for contributions various pictures taken on the trip.

SEND all letters to R. W. Gordon, Care of *Adventure Magazine*, Spring and Macdougal Streets, New York City.



THE TRAIL AHEAD

DECEMBER 30TH ISSUE

Besides the **new serial** and the **three complete novelettes** mentioned in the second contents page of this issue, the next *Adventure* will bring you the following stories:

OLD SAILS ***Charles Victor Fischer***
The Swede could do it.

ROVERS THREE Conclusion ***J. Allan Dunn***
After native gold.

MIGUEL DE CERVANTES Great Adventures of the Super-Minds ***Post Sargent***
The author of "Don Quixote."

NERVE ENOUGH ***Richard Howells Watkins***
It was up to the last airplane.

SACRED BONES ***John Murray Reynolds***
Relics of the past.

STILL FARTHER AHEAD

THE THREE ISSUES following the next will contain *long* stories by W. C. Tuttle, Thomson Burtis, L. Patrick Greene, Georges Surdez, Leslie McFarlane, T. S. Stribling, Norman Springer, Harold Lamb and Gordon MacCreagh; and short stories by Albert Richard Wetjen, F. St. Mars, L. Paul, Post Sargent, Captain Dingle, Kenneth Malcolm Murray, Raymond S. Spears, Robert Carse, J. D. Newsom, Bill Adams, Fiswoode Tarleton, Jack Rendel and others; stories of daring men in dangerous places up and down the earth.

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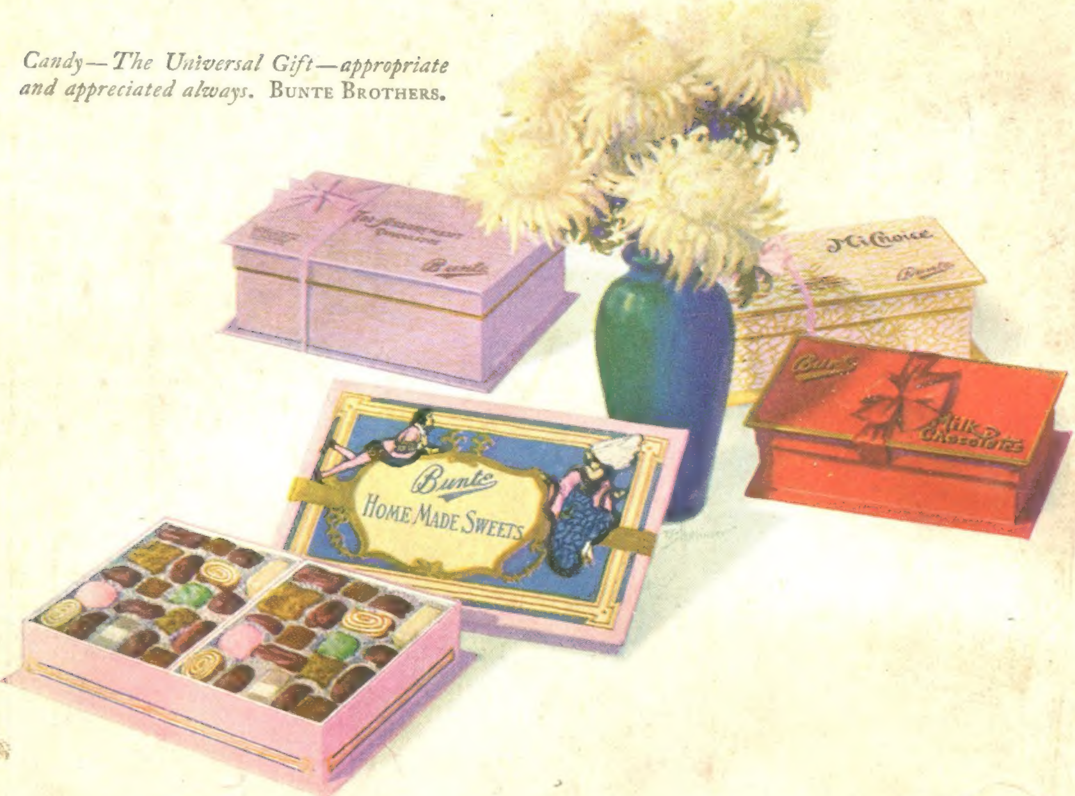

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